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## Confronting and Dismantling Whiteness in Higher Education: A Grassroots Approach

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Confronting and Dismantling Whiteness in Higher Education: A Grassroots Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate how an Educational Studies department in a small, Midwestern liberal arts college might confront and dismantle whiteness in curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices. Utilizing a critical participatory action research design, five higher education faculty engaged in a critical conversation inquiry group (Schieble et al., 2020) to develop their critical literacy (Rogers and Mosley, 2014). This study was designed to answer the following questions: How do faculty within an Educational Studies department think about their racial identities and the relevance of racial identity to the program, the institution, and higher education? How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop critical self-reflection? How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop racial literacy? How does participation in a critical conversation inquiry group affect curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices made by Educational Studies faculty? Participants analyzed personal narratives and meeting transcripts using critical discourse analysis that produced meeting notes. After the study, the researcher analyzed participant reflections and all other artifacts. The findings from this study have implications for critical conversation inquiry groups in higher education regarding faculty fitness as critical, anti-racist educators.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

In August of 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in the nearby community of Ferguson, Missouri. This occurred one year into my teaching career at the college level, and one year after moving back to the Midwest. At the time, I was aware of the protests, and I remember wondering if I should get more involved. I've always had a deep fear and indignation of unjust actions, especially those that lead to incarceration or death. I timidly looked to our college community for guidance, and I was met with indifference. People were aware of the tragedy, but the response was to quietly move on with the day to day.

What would register on our radars as something worthy of our attention? A year later, the Board of Trustees at our institution altered a policy interpretation to allow for LGBTQ+ students to enroll and employees to be hired. Although conversations and protests had been ongoing for years concerning the old policy interpretation, I can only speculate what tipped the scales. Additionally, the announcement of the new policy interpretation was delivered with the assumption that the community would figure out how to adapt its culture to embrace the change. In a Social Science Division meeting later that week, one brave faculty member (I will refer to as Dr. W.) asked how we were going to respond to the obvious need for community education and conversation. He explained that a communitywide announcement does not automatically change the culture. He recognized that we could not rely on anyone but ourselves to address the need of the moment. I was in awe of his wisdom and bravery. How did he know to ask that question

of us? I met with Dr. W. to envision next steps, and that is when the nascent idea of forming a Beloved Community was born. Our division brought in speakers and engaged in dialogue about LGBTQ+ and how to be more educated and inclusive.

In the fall of 2017, once again initiated by Dr. W., we expanded our Beloved Community to include education and conversations about the experience of African students at our college. Fellow academic divisions appreciated the model we used to improve our understanding of the LGBTQ+ community, and they took notice when we began to engage with African student issues. At this point I was still relying heavily on Dr. W. to choose topics, and I supported the work as a scheduler and liaison. I noticed that this time when Dr. W. brought up racial divides within our community, as opposed to gender identity, I was a little better equipped to understand. I attribute this preparedness to Dr. Matthew Davis at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The previous semester, in spring 2017, I read *Mapping Decline* (Gordon, 2009) in my first course with Dr. Davis, and I learned about systemic racism. It was the first time I looked at and saw the intentional and embedded racism within education, politics, economics, and other social systems. After four years, I began to notice that all advances being made in our community regarding a culture shift were the result of grassroots efforts, and I was excited to be better equipped to keep those efforts moving. *(I'd like to note that other faculty and students also were working at the grassroots level to raise awareness and help our community be more educated and inclusive.)*

In my fifth year as a college professor, in the spring of 2018, the Chief Executive of our institution enlisted me to lead a cultural competence task force charged with drafting an institutional diversity statement. This was the first nod from the

administration that there was support for the grassroots work already taking place. Gratefully the task force consisted of a diverse representation with varied expertise. We kept asking ourselves what would really help our culture shift. Although we agreed a DEI statement would help, our group felt strongly that we also needed education, dialogue, examination of college-wide practices, and a designated DEI office. In our short time together, we ultimately developed a proposal to hire an expert consultant to help us conduct training, a diversity audit, as well as draft a diversity, equity, and inclusion statement inviting community-wide input. During this same term, I participated in a Witnessing Whiteness group run by volunteers from the Metro St. Louis YWCA. It was the first time I had heard the term whiteness. The concurrent nature of these two activities helped immensely. I was able to see the ways in which whiteness would dictate a speedy and meaningless process for developing a diversity statement, and although it was counter-intuitive to support the group's decision to push back on the original assignment from the CE, I am grateful that the wisdom of the group prevailed over my desire to look good in front of our boss.

Although the results of the task force seemed to go nowhere, that experience made it clear that our grassroots efforts were still important and effective. We each continued to work within our own departments, student clubs, and academic divisions to raise awareness and continue the education on an invitational basis. Two years after the cultural competence task force was completed, with the change of leadership at our institution and the climate of George Floyd's very public murder, the proposal to hire an expert consultant got funded and began at the same time as this study. In the meantime, I took two more courses with Dr. Davis in the summer of 2018, and that was when I knew

I wanted to develop a study related to critical race theory and higher education. We learned about how the structure of non-profit higher education works against diversity, equity and inclusion (INCITE!, 2007, paperson, 2017) even though the spirit of a non-profit is to benefit collective public social needs. I wanted to understand how we might become better educated and more responsive as stewards of a non-profit organization. In other words, how were we taking responsibility for being an organization that was meant to meet the needs of a global community? I spent the following semester immersing myself in literature, asking what approaches we could take as a college community to continue our efforts at self-education and to support activism that lived up to our potential.

I became aware of the highly individualistic nature of whiteness and how this gets in the way of racial discourse (DiAngelo, 2018; Okun, 2020). It is not surprising that one of the difficulties our faculty face at the institution where I teach is a lack of collective, collaborative, and intentional work towards anti-racism because the faculty and the institution exist within a system built on whiteness (Arday & Mizra, 2018). In order to conduct a study about confronting and dismantling whiteness, it made sense to develop a model rooted in collaboration and dialogue (Sue, 2016).

I wondered, how can we expect to meet the needs of a global community if the faculty are not equipped? It was clear to me because of what I saw in my academic division that we needed to further the work of self-educating to bring about cultural and systemic change. During my research, I found a few examples of implemented and researched faculty initiatives regarding racial literacy. From these examples, I developed a study tailored to the department in which I teach. Specifically, I utilized the concept of

*critical conversations* combined with *inquiry groups* to form a model. I wanted to explore how a critical conversation inquiry group focused on Critical Whiteness studies (CWS) and Critical Race theory (CRT) might create a collaborative, critical, and self-reflective process focused on developing racial literacy.

For this study, the critical conversation inquiry group model involved one department (five faculty members including myself) meeting every week throughout a semester. The meetings on odd weeks (first, third, etc.) were focused on building collaborative capacity, developing racial literacy, and looking at curricular choices, pedagogical practices, and institutional policies through the lens of CRT and CWS. In the meetings on even weeks (second, fourth, etc.) the group collaboratively analyzed the transcript from the previous meeting through the lens of CRT to develop reflective capacity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research conducted for this study was informed by several intersecting theories from the following areas: (a) Racial Literacy, (b) Critical Discourse Studies, (c) Collaborative Inquiry. Racial literacy was the heart and content of this study. Critical discourse studies supported the analysis structure in this study. Collaborative inquiry was formative to the decision to conduct this study as participatory action research. A brief description of each area follows.

**Racial Literacy.** The concept of teaching racial literacy was originally constructed by parents who wanted their children of African descent to be wise to the ways they needed to defend themselves against racism. More recently, anti-racist activism has helped spread the concept of racial literacy to include more than people of



color in the call to action (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019; Sue, 2016). Racial literacy as it applies to education was of particular interest to this study (Benson & Fiarman, 2019; Heyback & Fraser Buress, 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Schieble, Vetter & Martin, 2020).

Racial literacy includes such tools for analysis as critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) BlackCrit (Graham et al., 2019) and critical whiteness studies (CWS). Additionally, Boston, Goffney & Gutierrez (2018) argue that teachers need to be prepared with much more than just content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, or knowledge of diverse students if they are going to be successful. They need political knowledge. In other words, because education exists within a political system, any conversation about anti-racism in education needs to include a conversation about the political context, especially the ways in which our systems are built on maintaining whiteness (Arday, 2018; Ellison and Langhout, 2016). Understanding how our religious beliefs or ideology have been shaped by whiteness (Jun, 2018) is also an important aspect of racial literacy. When talking about whiteness within our educational system, the conversation must also include anti-blackness and its effects (Love, 2019). Racial literacy is about understanding that we live in a racialized world and developing the skills to “probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation in US society” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013, p.386).

**Critical Discourse Studies.** Developing racial literacy requires the capacity be critical. Analysis and practice become critical when the purpose is a social change that gives agency, disrupts unjust power structures, and supports emancipation (Rogers &

Mosely, 2014). This study employed critical analysis of the dialogue the group engaged in using a critical conversation inquiry group format (Schieble, Vetter & Martin, 2020; Allen & Estler, 2002).

One of the tools of critical discourse studies is to look at the text within context. In other words, considering the social and historical context in which the spoken and written word take place and how text and context have an interactive relationship. Discourse is dynamic rather than static; therefore, tools of discourse analysis studies lend themselves well to dialogic processes like this study.

**Collaborative Inquiry.** One of the most difficult hurdles to overcome in anti-racist activism is the highly individualistic nature of whiteness (Diangelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019). Developing the capacity to co-construct and work collaboratively is an anti-racist act (Sue, 2016) that breaks down the influences of whiteness within our Western practices. Likewise, developing the capacity to have difficult and uncomfortable conversations builds racial stamina (Diangelo, 2018), racial literacy, and helps develop reflective capacity (Schieble, Vetter & Martin, 2020).

Cultural history activity theory (CHAT) also informed this study. The theory states that humans are naturally prone to communal work, experiential learning, and behavioral communication. Additionally, the theory posits that developing new tools (such as a critical conversations inquiry group) are central to the way we communicate and learn. Lastly, CHAT shows that we make and find meaning through community. Choosing a collaborative, participant researcher model was inspired by CHAT.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to confront and dismantle whiteness in an Educational Studies department's curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices using a critical conversation inquiry group. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do faculty within an Educational Studies department think about their racial identities and the relevance of racial identity to the program, the institution, and higher education?
2. How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop critical self-reflection?
3. How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop racial literacy?
4. How does participation in a critical conversation inquiry group affect curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices made by Educational Studies faculty?

The findings of this study could be useful to higher education faculty from other departments who are looking for ways to develop anti-racist practices, institutional leaders who are looking for ways to abolish racist institutional practices, other institutions that are looking for ways to dismantle whiteness in their institutional practices, and students of color who bear the negative effects of whiteness, white supremacy, and anti-blackness.

### **Significance**

Very little research has been conducted regarding the professional development of higher education faculty in critical whiteness studies. Critical thinking has been a buzzword in education for decades, but this concept has helped maintain the status quo of whiteness, white supremacy, and anti-blackness throughout institutions of education. A

common definition of critical thinking reads, “The objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Objectivity is a myth that helps perpetuate racism (DiAngelo, 2018). Allowing higher education faculty to develop and teach programs without professional development in CRT and CWS to support more inclusive and equitable approaches will only perpetuate racism within the institution and society. This study was a necessary step towards combatting white supremacy within our program and institution.

### **Delimitations**

When considering how to approach this study, I wanted to work with a larger number of faculty to achieve a larger sphere of influence. However, it became clear that this study needed to be conducted within one academic discipline, in this case Educational Studies, because of how it specifically relates to examining curricular and pedagogical choices. Additionally, because of the dialogic and sensitive nature of the study, a department of faculty who have already developed rapport was ideal. Lastly, because the researcher intended to be a participant, the department of which I am a member was the only option.

An additional consideration for this study was the amount of time. Ideally, the critical conversations inquiry group is a long-term and ongoing practice. Research shows that limited, short-term efforts towards changes related to social justice initiatives achieve negligible and sometimes negative results (Applebaum, 2019; Bennet et al., 2019). Although the intent of forming a critical conversation inquiry group was that it would become a long-term, embedded practice, this study could not be conducted long-term. It was determined that a semester, 12 meetings, would be enough time to collect

sufficient data to study the critical conversations inquiry group model and answer the research questions.

### **Organization of Study**

Chapter one provides an introduction and rationale for this study. Chapter two discusses the relevant literature to this study. Chapter three contains an explanation of the proposed methods for data collection and analysis. Chapters four and five will present data collected including transcripts, meeting notes, participant reflections, and artifacts. Analysis of this data will also be presented. Chapter six will reflect on the findings of this study and offer recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Because of the embedded and often ignored nature of whiteness, the act of teaching in the United States is racialized and racist. Society has evolved to the point where being racist is considered taboo, but racism is alive and persists throughout education. What responsibility do college faculty have in this dichotomy? Without critically examining ourselves, and our curricular and pedagogical choices, it is certain we will perpetuate racism in practice. In other words, maintaining the current course is a choice that reinforces racism in education. The need for multicultural thinking and action cannot be approached as an add-on (Burrell, 1997) within higher education professional development, and yet it still is. The basis of this study came from several intersecting fields that show a gap in research regarding the professional development of higher education faculty to make anti-racist curricular and pedagogical choices.

This study consisted of five higher education faculty within one department. The members met weekly to conduct professional development using a critical conversation inquiry group (Schieble et. al., 2020) to develop the capacity to critically examine their curricular and pedagogical decisions as well as institutional practices such as hiring and professional development. Using critical participatory action research, this professional development initiative was studied for its viability as an anti-racist method for academic departments in higher education. This literature review will examine research in the areas of Critical Race theory (CRT), Racial literacy, Critical Whiteness studies (CWS), and collaborative inquiry to illustrate the foundations of this study.

### Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Although the field of CRT began in the legal arena, it is now commonly applied in the field of education as well (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Tate, 1997). There is a wide range of research on CRT in schools and in teacher education and within undergraduate and graduate programs, but there is very little mention of CRT as it applies to higher education faculty.

CRT grows out of Critical theory (Horkheimer, 1972) which calls for critiquing and changing society towards liberation. In the case of this study, participants critiqued and identified changes in practices within the department and worked towards institutional changes (see Chap. 3). It is Critical theory that informed and framed this study as critical action research. As Buckelew & Ewing (2019) explain, action research in education is premised on teacher inquiry which is reflexive, recursive, and responsive. In this study, teacher inquiry was also critical (Carson, 1990; Kemmis et al., 2013) and dialogical (Bakhtin, 1986) adding dimensions characteristic of critical action research.

Keating (2000) states, “we must develop pedagogical practices that enable us to begin divesting ourselves of this ‘white’ frame of reference by exposing and resisting its power” (p. 428-429). Criticality in this study looked like a department engaging in dialogical analysis about how whiteness affects curriculum and teaching approaches to bring about a change through action. McLaren (2003) states:

From the perspective of critical educational theorists, the curriculum represents much more than a program of study, a classroom text, or a course syllabus.

Rather, it represents the introduction to a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society. (p. 86)

Because the impact of education goes well beyond the classroom, this study was much more than a few white faculty conducting a self-analysis for the sake of personal and professional improvement. The study sought to enact a professional development initiative of dismantling whiteness so that the faculty and curriculum within the Educational Studies program were rethinking power dynamics and taking action towards equity.

The tenets of CRT were foundational to the development of this study (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). There are five major components or tenets of CRT: (1) the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the idea of an interest convergence; (3) the social construction of race; (4) the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling; and (5) the notion that whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation. Tenets one and three were the premise on which the work in this study began. Tenet two, four and five informed the exercises the inquiry group engaged in to develop their racial literacy and envision anti-racist curricular and pedagogical choices.

Willingness to engage in racial dialogue is part of developing critical and racial literacy. Believing that by not talking about race, it will become a non-issue is a fallacy (Edwards, 2017). Edwards (2017) explains, “This idea holds two implications. First, it suggests a seductive idea: there is an easy solution to all types of strife in our society; just ignore them. Second, and more problematic for multicultural research, education, and social activism, we are being told that our work is not part of the solution, but rather the source of the problem” (p. 5). The point of this study was to resist the notion that continuing to study the racial dynamics within higher education is passé, unnecessary or detrimental.



Rodriguez (2010) offers a new perspective called abolitionist pedagogy. The idea is to “generate new epistemic and intellectual approaches to meaning, knowledge, learning, and practice for the sake of life, liberation, and new social possibilities” (p. 9). Abolitionist pedagogy recognizes that merely reforming education through implicit bias training is not possible as long as the anti-black and white supremacist foundations remain. Rethinking the entire system requires asking these questions: What counts as knowledge? Whose voices are included, honored, and believed? What ways of knowing matter? The Paulo and Nita Freire Project for International Critical Pedagogy at McGill University was an invaluable resource for this kind of work. For example, in one publication several articles highlighted examples of teaching that renegotiate the power dynamics between students and teachers, consider students and teachers as social actors in and out of school, and support marginalized learners in spite of a system set up to oppress them (Kress, 2013). There is hope and progress, but most examples come from K-12 education. It is time for higher education to join the effort.

The lack of emphasis on critical pedagogy within higher education faculty preparation is an example of a system that seeks to maintain white supremacy and anti-blackness (Kincheloe, 2008). Faculty cannot possibly empower students to become critical thinkers and actors without developing critical pedagogy through inquiry practices. In other words, faculty will reinforce Western practices through ethnocentric (Reagan, 2018) implicit bias until intentional investment is made in professional development that engages faculty in the process of critical conversations (Schieble et al., 2020) about whiteness and racism. Faculty need to experience the process in order to teach it to students effectively (Burke, 2013; Girvan et al., 2016).

College faculty purport to teaching critical thinking, but can it be truly considered critical if taught by those who have unexamined racial identities? Critical pedagogue Ira Shor (2012) defines critical pedagogy as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse (p. 129).

Do faculty know what the dominant myths are? Are faculty equipped to recognize the deep-seated racial biases that define the social context and ideologies within higher education? This study provided a platform for a department to begin this collective and collaborative process of critical inquiry, analysis and action.

### **Racial Literacy**

Critical Race theorists start from the premise that racism is part of everyday life; it is not unusual or infrequent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Understanding this tenet is one example of what it means to be racially literate. Racial literacy is about developing the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate a racialized society. Twine (2010) sets forth six criteria that describe racial literacy:

1. Recognition of racism as a contemporary rather than historical problem
2. Consideration of the ways in which race and racism are influenced by other factors such as class, gender, and sexuality
3. Understanding of the cultural value of whiteness

4. Belief in the constructedness and socialization of racial identity
5. Development of language practices through which to discuss race, racism, and antiracism
6. Ability to decode race and racialism

As Grayson (2019) concludes in her study, “Racial literacy is literacy.” Because literacy exists within a context, and in this case a culture and context with racial blind spots dominated by whiteness, Grayson points out that literacy without racial literacy is not culturally relevant. However, the study of whiteness is often left out of racial literacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and this can reinforce implicit biases. Racial literacy must include examination of whiteness and one’s own racial identity (Rogers & Mosley, 2014).

For example, one study conducted with pre-service teachers, examined the use of documentaries and dialogue as a tool for preparing new teachers to work with children from low socio-economic status (Bryant et al, 2015). The facilitators were intentional about raising awareness of white privilege through the study, knowing that whiteness and racial implicit bias are linked. Participants needed to process their racial identity in order to understand the way race is a social construct. Examining racial identity and developing racial literacy were key components of this study.

DiAngelo (2018) identifies several terms or concepts that can be used to develop racial literacy:

- Noticing and Naming whiteness (individualistic ideology, belief of objectivity, everyone else is the “other”)
- Acknowledging racism (did not end with slavery or civil rights movement)

- Defining racism accurately (Debunking “good people can’t be racist”)
- Naming and noticing white supremacy (systemic racism)
- Neo-racism (being racist but not calling it racist)
- Color-blind Racism (it is racist to see race)
- Aversive racism (enacting racism while believing one is enlightened and immune)
- Race Talk (embedded images and language positioning blacks as lowest in hierarchy)
- Cultural Racism (even 3-year olds know “it’s better to be white”)

One study that illustrates what happens when racial literacy is not developed comes from Houshmand, et al. (2014). In their study, white students were immersed in a service-learning project within a low-income, African-American community. The white students were given no preparation regarding their racial attitudes. The study showed that after working within the community for the semester, racial attitudes of white participants did not improve and reinforced negative stereotypes. Assuming that students will naturally improve their racial attitudes without intentional, critical conversations throughout the coursework is an error this study attempted to correct. Additionally, the authors noted that instructors of the service-learning courses were not qualified as multi-cultural educators, and the authors suggested the need for trained facilitators to add the depth and expertise to engage students with issues of race and racism. Rather than hire a multicultural expert who adds this necessary dimension, faculty need to develop this capacity as they would any other area of expertise relevant to their teaching.

When working with faculty to develop racial literacy, it is important to address the values and beliefs of those faculty as part of the process (Sanders, 1999;

Schniedewind, 2005). To what extent are faculty aware of how their beliefs impact the way they teach? Sanders offers four findings that are supported by later research:

- (1) Teachers are more successful when they assume multiple value orientations.
- (2) In-service professional development should build in specific demonstrations of how values influence what is taught and how it is taught
- (3) Dismantling what white privilege looks like: teachers stepping out of “purveyor of knowledge” and facilitating, using texts written by non-white voices, utilizing pedagogies that foster respect for difference (i.e. feminist, multicultural, and constructivist).
- (4) White privilege can be addressed by consciously changing the perception that minorities are victims- they have agency, voice, and knowledge that is valuable.

Part of addressing faculty awareness is examining one’s history or journey as context (Mosley, Wetzel & Rogers, 2015). Because beliefs are influenced by one’s sociocultural history (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) this study included a personal narrative, requiring participants to consider their racial history and identity. Additionally, it was important for participants to gain historical knowledge of racist practices throughout the educational system that still impact students of color disproportionately, such as Brown vs. Board of Education, gifted education, and ability-grouping (Stark, 2014).

One danger or roadblock often encountered when working with white people is the misconception that “whiteness” is synonymous with white people (Keating, 2000; DiAngelo, 2018). Additionally, any white person or people run the risk of reinforcing whiteness when investigating race due to implicit biases (Lauer, 2019; Benson & Fiarman, 2019). Lastly, another landmine in activist work is white guilt or white fragility

(Keating, 2000; DiAngelo, 2018) which halts progress and diverts attention away from dismantling whiteness, reinforcing white privilege. Being aware of these obstacles is all a part of racial literacy.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS)**

Extensive research has been conducted around one professional development initiative that spans many fields and many age groups: implicit bias training. Recognizing unconscious bias is an important element to antiracist activism because implicit biases cause people to act in racist ways without realizing it (Benson & Firaman, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Studies have found that implicit bias training is only effective when it is “recursive, longitudinal, collective, and community based” (Bennet et al., 2019, p.912). This study was designed with these criteria in mind.

Gaining an awareness of implicit bias and understanding its influence is only the first step in antiracist activism. In her dissertation, Lund states, “Once an educator acknowledges racism and their participation, it is much easier to see the impact racism has on interpersonal relationships with learners, the curricula, program planning, research, and relationships with colleagues” (2005, p. 81), but awareness is what lays the groundwork and is not the final goal.

Once there is awareness and recognition of implicit bias, the concept of whiteness and the reality of white privilege can be introduced. In a study on whiteness in academic libraries Brook et al. (2015), found that one way to combat white privilege is to develop a better relationship to difference. The authors explain,

Students and faculty will study, interact, socialize, learn, and contribute differently and will require a diversity of spaces, rules personalities, techniques,

and materials to support them. To be truly responsive to these real and welcome differences, more and diverse voices must be present in the conversations that determine policy and practice, and those voices need to be invested with the power to be heard (Brook et al., 2015, p.277).

Combatting racism is not only about developing an understanding of difference, but also dismantling the power differential enacted through whiteness.

Studies have also shown that implicit bias training can be detrimental when it does not go far enough to shift people out of willful ignorance (Applebaum, 2019). Applebaum's study focuses on the trend of using implicit bias training to shift campus climate. She argues for initiatives that seek to dismantle the mechanisms that protect the dominant narrative and allow ignorance as the status quo, also known as whiteness. Because of Applebaum's findings, this study focused on initiatives that disrupt the dominant narrative (Dewey, 1986) and build the capacity to examine and value multiple narratives (Medina, 2013), strategies like critical conversations (Schieble et al., 2020) focused on critical whiteness studies.

Petersen (2019) argues that the danger of relying on implicit bias training (IBT) as a reform is two-fold. First, IBT becomes an excuse or an explanation to exonerate racist acts and effects because they were unconscious. Secondly, IBT does not address the policies and standards on which the system is founded and still operates. Petersen's study focuses on the legal system, but the implications are just as relevant to the education system. That is why this study goes beyond IBT. This study sought to uncover the underlying anti-blackness and white supremacy within the curricular and pedagogical practices of an Educational Studies department.

Implicit bias has also been named unconscious bias (Tate & Page, 2018) but this new label has been problematic for the same reasons, namely, the trap of excusing racist acts on an invisible and uncontrollable influence. “Unconscious bias is the acceptable face of racism,” (Tate & Page, 2018, p.142) so the term unconscious bias has become a new comfortable way for the white majority to brush off the need for any real change. Implicit or unconscious bias has already undermined antiracist efforts by allowing institutions to claim they have trained everyone without enacting any systemic changes. In addition, the training is enacted in a biased way: in a short amount of time, considering only individual actions, gently and politely, and intellectually rather than viscerally (Tate & Page, 2018). Addressing implicit bias cannot be approached like a disease with a one-time inoculation.

Nor can professional development for higher education faculty focus on offering new methods without a change in mindset (Benson & Fiarman, 2019). Racism is as pervasive a concept as original sin. Many are not aware of the ways in which either ideology pervades every aspect of life; therefore, it seems irrelevant to discuss. In the case of race, white people “honestly don’t see themselves as having a racial identity” (Benson & Fiarman, 2019, p.5). Recognizing that faculty are already engaged in racialized teaching, this study provided the platform for faculty to realize it too.

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) focus on making visible the structures that create and sustain racism through white supremacy. “The challenging of normative Whiteness is paramount in dismantling the cycle of inequality that permeates society” (Arday, 2018, p. 142). Analyzing individual complicity and privilege within the system of whiteness (McIntosh, 1988) as well as examination of the systems that lead to this



privilege (Bercini, 2017) are both vital to an effective use of CWS. That is why this study included examination of individual complicity and systemic whiteness. Meister (2017) explains that “While present-day individuals did not create the historical context . . . individuals must unpack where and how they situate within systems, connecting individual experiences to structures for alternate actions” (p. 95).

Scholars have concluded that the current rhetoric of whites being ignorant of whiteness serves to reinforce racism (Castagano, 2013; Ellison & Langhout, 2016; Knowles, et al., 2014). The deep fear of being cast as racist is a strong force working against effective anti-racist professional development. People are more willing to discuss implicit bias, but this can lead to misconceptions about what anti-racism requires. Anti-racist efforts must include dismantling whiteness (Matias & Newlove, 2017). Amy Brown, of Black Lives Matter, explains that the responsibility of dismantling whiteness falls on white people whereas the liberation of people of color needs to come from POC to avoid the dangers of whiteness, and together these two approaches work toward social justice (Meister, 2017).

Whiteness, white people, and white culture are not synonymous (Leonardo, 2002). As Gillborn explains, “whiteness is not a race; whiteness . . . is an ideology, a form of belief, and a system of assumptions and practices. It is not a description of a people” (2014, p. 32).

CWS provides the tools for developing the awareness and knowledge requisite to dismantling racist practices often mislabeled as best practices (Kleut, 2011). For example, one tool involves sharing stories, analyzing the beliefs within the story, tracking those beliefs to their ideological foundations, considering how those ideologies influence

bodies and lives, and considering the choices in the story and alternative options (Meister, 2017). This study employed Meister's story analysis tool within one of the critical conversation inquiry group meetings.

Another CWS tool used in this study is illustrated by Matias and Mackey in their 2016 article about "a pedagogical strategy for self-interrogation of whiteness" (p. 32). The authors focused on three stages required for success: emotional investment, sharing the burden, and envisioning change. Their use of CWS also included self-reflection. Chapter 3 includes a more specific explanation of how this study incorporated the above-mentioned CWS tools.

### **Collaborative Inquiry**

Designing a study based on a collaborative approach was intentional. One of the barriers to anti-racist activism is the highly individualistic nature of whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018) and a dialogical approach is one of liberation and inclusion (Shor & Friere, 1987). Because it is through utterances that ideological sign systems are transmitted (Bakhtin, 1986), this study included participants' self-examination of racial identity, dialogical reflection and analysis of utterances, and co-constructed action plans. In order to prepare for and provide the conditions for students to develop the capacity to interrogate epistemology, consider the consequences, and take liberating action, faculty must first engage in the process (Burke, 2013; Girvan et al., 2016).

Because race is socially constructed (Coates, 2015; Kendi, 2019), it needs to be socially deconstructed. Karikari (2018) calls for co-construction, social and discursive practices, awareness of the socio-historical and contextual nature of racial dialogue. This cannot be accomplished on an individual basis, nor should it be. Choosing a collaborative

inquiry model recognizes that racial literacy is all about examining the way we talk about race and racism (Wetzel & Rogers, 2015; Vetter, 2014), what we say, and how we say it. This discourse does not occur in a vacuum. In other words, racial discourse is social in nature and therefore needs to be studied as such.

Rather than merely examining individual practices, this study included analysis of programmatic and institutional practices, recognizing that racism is systemic. Developing an understanding that racism is systemic and exists on an institutional level is vital (Lauer, 2019). This is why a collective approach made sense in this study because it shifted the focus from individual acts. As the title of Kauanui's 2016 article states, racism is "a structure, not an event." In other words, the purpose of this study was not to point fingers at individual racist tendencies, but rather to work together to liberate attitudes, choices, and practices within the program in reaction to systemic impositions that were before unseen.

Another compelling reason to approach this study as a collaboration was to combat the misconception that faculty should be able to opt out of antiracist activism. Lund (2010) writes about her lonely anti-racist journey as a white educator within a continuing adult education program among white students and faculty who did not see the need to examine race. This is often the narrative, the lone actor, and was the impetus for this study. Many interventions and training programs regarding faculty attitudes and knowledge of equitable practices have been published. Studies span teachers of all levels and disciplines. However, most studies focus on raising awareness of implicit bias and some offer techniques or methods to use within the classroom, but almost none of them takes place at the university level nor involve faculty in the development of collaborative

and collective racial dialogue. In a recent study, Williams (2019) concludes, “Scientific evaluation of dialogue-style interventions is needed, but so is the development of scientifically informed models of behavior change to guide the content and processes of the interventions” (p.64).

Some of the roadblocks to collaborative and effective communication mirror the list of patterns found in “white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 68) and were precisely the reason for engaging in critical conversation for this study. The list includes:

- Preference for racial segregation, and a lack of a sense of loss about segregation
- Seeing ourselves as individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization
- Lack of racial humility, and unwillingness to listen
- Dismissing what we don’t understand
- Confusing disagreement with not understanding
- Focus on intention over impact

Each of the items above demonstrate the ways in which white supremacy is maintained through dialogical habits within academia and the larger society. Only by intentionally practicing effective collaboration and communication can faculty develop the skills necessary to break down these oppressive practices and become critically effective teachers.

## CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

As a faculty member in higher education, I've noticed that most of our learning takes place individually in isolation or during one-time workshops. The results have limited impact and do not guarantee a meaningful shift in program-wide practices. This study sought to employ an initiative that might become an embedded and collaborative part of curricular, pedagogical, and policy decision-making. The purpose of this initiative was to add a critical lens to the way we thought about and made choices individually and collectively, ensuring greater equity and inclusion throughout the program. This study took place within an Educational Studies department at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest of the United States. This chapter will describe the research design, ethical and protective measures, sampling techniques, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and limitations of this study.

### Research Design

This qualitative study was a critical participatory action research project (Kemmis et al., 2013; MacKay, 2016). The purpose of this kind of study was “to change social practices, including research itself, to make them more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable and more just and inclusive” (Kemmis et al., 2013, p.2-3). In other words, the design of this study was in response to the research in the field that suggests that in order to bring about meaningful change, the research itself needs to model the inclusivity and justice we seek in the change, and the process needs to yield results that will build momentum towards better thinking and acting. The choice to utilize a qualitative approach aligned with the purpose. In qualitative research the

findings are derived from co-constructed knowledge by participants in an ongoing fashion whilst they make meaning of an experience, an event, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of this study was to confront and dismantle whiteness in curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices in an Educational Studies program employing a critical conversation inquiry group.

The format for this study entailed a critical conversation inquiry group (Schieble et al., 2020) meeting on a weekly basis. These group meetings were an enactment of critical participatory action research. As Rogers & Mosley (2014) point out, for something to be critical it needs to lead to social activism. Additionally, a critical study addresses oppressive practices (Friere, 1970). The concept of critical elevates educational action research to consider social change (Kemmis et al, 2013). Likewise, the participatory element was intentionally chosen as a way to de-emphasize individualistic efforts that run counter to examining racism (DiAngelo, 2018; Okun, 2020). The participatory method utilizes dialogical praxis that is named as a solution to many social ills (Shor & Friere, 1987). Participation is what helps us learn (Burke, 2013; Girvan et al., 2016) and is necessary to a meaningful and impactful educative initiative. The roots of action research can be traced back to Kurt Lewin (1946) who proposed a spiral-like cycle of planning, action, observing, and reflection. This study built from and goes beyond this earlier model to include considerations of moral obligation, action, and emancipation (Malcom et al., 2009).

Critical participatory action research “has the goal of helping participants to work together towards making their individual and collective practices meet the criteria of rationality, sustainability and justice” (Kemmis et al., 2016, p. 22). The critical

conversation inquiry group model was chosen because of the way participants had consistent opportunities to develop rational (i.e. reasonable, comprehensible, coherent, sensible) ideas through recursive dialogue. Additionally, the critical conversation inquiry group was a sustainable (i.e. long-term, productive, satisfying, less wasteful) process because it was participant-driven and built into the existing system, department meetings. Lastly, the critical conversation inquiry group model was just (i.e. inclusive, solidary, avoids dominance and oppression, does not cause harm) because it was designed for consensus building rather than majority rule.

As I became more familiar with the concept of a critical conversation, I began to realize the premise was that educators need to participate in and develop critical capacity through conversation in order to be effective in facilitating critical conversation in the classroom. As the authors explain, the purpose of a critical conversation is to:

Support students with the tools to speak back to injustices they encounter in and outside of school. These discussions also foster ways to recognize and reflect on how people benefit from historic and present injustices in our society and institutions. Thus, critical conversations build students' literacies for full participation in civic life and democracy. (Schieble et al., 2020, p.13).

In addition to building our students' critical capacity (Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J., 2017; Friere, 1970; Kemmis et al, 2016; Rogers & Mosley 2014), the study was designed for the faculty to confront and dismantle the injustices present in the program and the institution as members of a higher education system.

Using coordinated and intentional efforts to develop critical awareness and capacity, the department more fully addressed student learning needs by re-examining

curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices within the program and the institution. By positioning ourselves as learners, we were enacting a key aspect of the process, to start from a position of openness and curiosity. This is why a critical conversation inquiry group was employed, to give faculty the experience of how to engage as students in building their critical capacity, experiencing the process of developing their own critical capacity through critical race theory and critical whiteness studies.

The critical conversation inquiry group helped faculty develop the following critical capacities: critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and a critical learner stance. Critical literacy is understanding the power of language to shape how we understand ourselves and the world. Critical pedagogy is characterized by uncovering social systems that influence and hinder teaching and learning. A critical learner stance requires practicing critical self-reflection, characterized by opening up to what is not known rather than proving one's knowledge. The purpose of an inquiry group is to form around a problem of practice, and in this case the group formed to develop its critical practices to be better equipped to help students become critical practitioners.

The inquiry group approach employed was two-fold: dialogic and analytical. The dialogical aspect of the approach was founded on the concept of "talking to learn" with the goal of collaboration (Schieble et al., 2020). Each meeting within the study involved dialogue among the participants centered on examining various topics related to whiteness and racism, such as defensiveness, power, privilege, vulnerability, systemic vs. individual racism, white supremacy culture, and validity. The topics were chosen based on the literature review as well as my personal experience of developing new knowledge.



This knowledge-building and skill-building was a necessary step to developing the capacity to confront and dismantle whiteness.

Additionally, the participants analyzed transcripts of each meeting as a group using tools from critical discourse studies (see table 2). Critical discourse tools were chosen because they can be used to focus on how discourses are constructed, and how discourses enact social relationships and social identities, specifically those related to dominance, oppression, power, and justice (Bartlett, 2012; Chouliarki & Fairclough, 1999).

Critical discourse studies represent a large field and is not a method in and of itself. In this study, data collected in the form of transcripts and written texts were analyzed as both **D**iscourse and **d**iscourse. In other words, **D**iscourse is the way we talk, act, feel, think because of our history, experiences, context, relationships, social identities, etc. that allow us to participate in a social group whereas **d**iscourse refers to language in use, spoken or written (Gee, 1996). The transcripts were analyzed by looking at the social connections among the participants' **D**iscourse as well as the language being used, or **d**iscourse. The following paragraphs will discuss the tools of analysis that were employed in this study.

There are many ways to analyze texts. For this study, the analytic tools (see table 2) were chosen for their capacity to add a critical lens. As Janks (2000) explains, critical language awareness is about looking at the way texts are constructed. Unpacking text can raise awareness of choices, like what was said and what wasn't said. Fairclough (2011) describes three tools known as genre, discourse, and style. Looking at *genre* means analyzing text for "ways of interacting" (p.121) or "patterns of interaction" (Rogers &

Mosley, 2014). In other words, the text is examined for evidence of the ways in which participants take turns, react, respond, interrupt, etc. Using the tool Fairclough (2011) calls *discourse* which refers to “ways of representing” is like looking for themes that may have emerged (Rogers & Mosley, 2014). For example, the participants could look at how the idea of race was represented within the dialogue. Lastly, *style* refers to “ways of being” (Fairclough, 2011) or looking at the variety of ideas or positions taken (Rogers & Mosley, 2014). This analysis tool looks at the way participants represent themselves and their ideas through their use of verbs and verb phrases.

### **Research Context**

This study was conducted in an Educational Studies department within a small liberal arts college (*I'll call it River College from now on as a pseudonym*) in the Midwest region of the United States. River College, as described in the first chapter, has had a long history of ignoring equity, inclusion, belonging and mattering as a whole. It has been very recent that the community of River College, through grassroots efforts, has lifted up LGBTQ+ and international BIPOC student rights. River College was founded over 100 years ago to provide an educational experience founded on the principles of Christian Science. The practice among Christian Scientists is as diverse as the people who identify as Christian Scientists. Like any social organization in the United States, Christian Science as a religion, and Christian Scientists as religious practitioners, have been influenced by whiteness. Part of the recent efforts to understand diversity equity, inclusion, belonging, and mattering at River College was a study of the student experience specifically related to Christian Science. Our religious affiliation as

participants was considered when designing this study, knowing that we would be writing an autobiography and examining our ideological beliefs.

The participants in this study consisted of the researcher and four additional people. All participants were educators; white; ages 46-54; four females and one male; able-bodied; cis-gender; middle-class; married w/children; four from the United States and one from Canada; traveled internationally; Christian Scientists; ranking from instructor to professor; and employed in the same department. The participants have all been given pseudonyms, and will be further described below, after the researcher bio.

### **Researcher Bio**

One of the main reasons this study included the researcher, myself, as a participant was that the process of dismantling whiteness requires self-analysis and self-reflection. The focus for this work needed to shift to the educators themselves taking responsibility for their complicity in perpetuating whiteness and racism (Galman et al., 2010; Knowles et al., 2014). I am a white, female educator. I was born and raised in a predominantly white, middle-class, suburban part of St. Louis, Missouri. I attended a predominantly white private school with a Christian foundation. In college, my preparation as a teacher included some discussion of race and some focus on how to approach differences in education regarding boys and girls.

After college, I intentionally chose to apply to work in a private school. Although I told myself it was because I did not want to bother with transferring my Illinois license to California, it had much more to do with staying in a social and cultural demographic that felt comfortable. After completing my Masters' degree in Educational Leadership, I became a principal in the same school where I taught. Racism and whiteness were an

issue throughout my 20 years at the school, but no one in a position of power was equipped to address it, especially me.

I moved back to the Midwest to become an assistant professor in the Educational Studies department at River College, from which I earned my BA degree. I joined the faculty and discovered that the institution was wrestling with misunderstandings of gender identity and sexual orientation that continued to result in homophobia and gender discrimination. This opened the door for more frank conversations about racism on campus, but they soon morphed into an initiative on cultural competence that faded from the priority list and then due to a very recent change in leadership those conversations have been resurrected. When I first joined the fray and became aware of how much I did not know about diversity, equity and inclusion, a fire was lit that has not faded.

When I began a PhD program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis studying Teaching and Learning Processes, I thought that my interests were related to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and experiential education. It is through my courses within the PhD program that I realized social justice and anti-racist activism were much stronger interests of mine. I mention the above context of my educational journey and the aspects of my identity because these inevitably played a role in the way I participated in this study. I am also aware that I still have a great deal to learn, and I entered this study knowing that this research would affect participants, including me, which would then affect the research process. In fact, this study was designed so that the process of conducting the research would allow for all participants to learn, and un-learn, including me.

### **Participant Bios**

Participants do not begin as empty slates. Each participant brought a unique upbringing, sense of identity, background knowledge, and attitude that affected our work together. Below is an introduction to the diversity of participants within this study. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym. Because there was one male amongst four females, the pronoun “they” will be used for all participants to offer the same anonymity.

Cathy is a British-born Canadian citizen who spent most of their early years in England and moved to Canada where they’ve lived their whole adult life and raised a family there. Because the reconciliation work being done in Canada, Cathy has an extensive understanding of indigenous knowledge and practices. Cathy brought a knowledge base to the study that no other participant had. Cathy also brought enthusiasm and humility.

Jane is a citizen of the United States who spent many of their formative years living abroad with a parent in the foreign service. Although Jane had very little background knowledge relating to anti-racism and whiteness, they approached the work with humility and vulnerability. Jane’s strength was their capacity to listen and make connections between and among the texts.

Susie is a citizen of the United States who has traveled abroad extensively and has a degree in international higher education. Susie brought a sophisticated vocabulary and broad background knowledge in equity and social justice.

Lisa is a citizen of the United States who has led several study-abroad programs focusing on outdoor education. Lisa has openly embraced previous work related to cultural competence and social justice. Lisa’s scholarly focus has been outdoor and

experiential education, social-emotional learning, and community education. Lisa was fairly new to the work of anti-racism.

Because part of the impetus for the study was to improve my work and those around me regarding anti-racist practices within my institution, starting with the department the researcher had access to and was already a member of made the most sense. Participants in this department were made aware of the researcher's interest in studying the department's process of confronting and dismantling whiteness. Participants gave a verbal, non-binding, preliminary agreement to participate in the study. The sampling strategy was purposeful because this sample represented a typical sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, the sample was from a department of faculty in a single content-area, a department of faculty at a liberal arts college, and was specific to what was being studied, the research problem.

The research problem grew out of a confluence of events. The researcher moved to the Midwest in the summer of 2013. Just over a year later, an unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, was shot and killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, MO. This event and the subsequent trial results led to protests and reignited the conversation about violence against Black Lives. In the fall of 2015, the academic division of which the researcher is a member, began the work of questioning campus-wide practices of discrimination to bring about systemic change. These efforts showed promise, but lacked the regularity and support needed for real change. In the fall of 2016, the researcher began PhD graduate coursework that included topics such as historical and systemic racism in St. Louis and historical and systemic racism in higher education. Lone faculty within River College continued to carry the torch of trying to

move the administration to meaningful self-examination of inequitable practices and working towards cultural competence. With the turnover of several top leadership positions, movement seemed possible. In 2020, the institution developed a new strategic plan, began a diversity audit and climate survey, and the Educational Studies department co-constructed a new mission statement. All of these changes positioned this study to be conducted in fertile circumstances for social change.

### **Plans for Data Collection**

Data collection occurred on a weekly basis throughout the study (see Table 1).

The data was collected using the following participant-generated sources:

**Personal narrative** – Participants wrote a personal narrative, a racial autobiography.

This was done at the beginning of the study but analyzed after studying or developing racial literacy (learning about power, privilege, and oppression). The personal narrative helped answer the first research question: *How do faculty within an Educational Studies department think about their racial identities and the relevance of racial identity to the program, the institution, and higher education?*

**Meeting transcripts** – The first meeting was recorded, and the researcher transcribed it using MyMedia. The second meeting involved participants reviewing and analyzing the transcript using tools of discourse analysis studies as mentioned in the section on research design. These tools were directly aligned with this study's purpose: *to confront and dismantle whiteness in an Educational Studies department's curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices using a critical conversation inquiry group.*

**Meeting notes** – The group kept notes on a shared Google document to record the analysis of transcripts. This instrument helped answer the third and fourth research

questions of this study: *How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop racial literacy?* AND *How does participation in a critical conversation inquiry group affect curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices made by Educational Studies faculty?* The format for the notes is illustrated in Table 2. The analysis conducted by the group was an inductive process of identifying textual evidence and making notes, comments, and observations about the line of text, and later identifying possible codes (see Table 4).

**Participant reflections** – The final 8-10 minutes of each meeting was given for participants to write a reflection. Reflections were uploaded to Google docs for shared access. This instrument helped answer the second research question of this study: *How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop critical self-reflection?* The protocol for the reflections consists of five questions (see Table 3).

Table 1  
*Data Collection Timeline*

<b>Mtg #</b>	<b>Expected Date</b>	<b>Meeting Procedure</b>	<b>Data Collection (artifacts produced during meeting)</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>0</b>	Prior to Week 1	Participants write their racial autobiography in preparation for the first meeting	Personal Narrative	Capturing Pre-work baseline
<b>1</b>	Week 1	Watch “Why I’m not racist” is only half the story (DiAngelo, 2018); Discuss fears and experiences using “White Fragility in Action” (DiAngelo, 2018, p.119-122); use final 10 minutes for writing self-reflections (5 Qs)	Transcript of Meeting #1; Participant reflection #1	Examine Vulnerability



1.5	Prior to Week 2	Participants will read one another's reflections from meeting #1		Sharing the Burden
2	Week 2	Analyze transcript and participant reflections from meeting #1 (see table 2 & 4);	Meeting #2 notes	Practice critical reflection and Racial literacy
3	Week 3	Read excerpt from Meister (2017, p. 95-95); Read <i>White Supremacy Culture</i> (Okun); Rethink KWL to consider what we don't know- dig into uncertainty; use final 10 minutes for writing self-reflections (5 Qs)	Transcript of Meeting #3; Participant reflection #2	Orienting our Work Practice a learner stance (Schieble et al., 2020)
3.5	Prior to Week 4	Participants will read one another's reflections from meeting #3		Sharing the Burden
4	Week 4	Analyze transcript and participant reflections from meeting #3 (see table 2 & 4);	Meeting #4 Notes	Practice critical reflection and Racial literacy
5	Week 5	Discuss racial autobiographies using questions from (Meister, 2017, p. 94); final 10 minutes for writing self-reflections (5 Qs)	Transcript of Meeting #5; Participant reflection #3	Practice critical conversation
5.5	Prior to Week 6	Participants will read one another's reflections from meeting #5		Sharing the Burden
6	Week 7	Analyze transcript and participant reflections from meeting #5 (see table 2 & 4);	Meeting #6 Notes	Practice critical reflection and Racial literacy
6.5	Between Week 7 & 8	Participants will read excerpt from Reagan's (2018) <i>Non-Western Educational Traditions</i> (pp.1-9)		Preparing epistemological schema;
7	Week 8	Develop and test questions to confront and dismantle whiteness in curricular and pedagogical practices; use final 10 minutes for writing self-reflections (5 Qs)	Transcript of Meeting #7; Participant reflection #4	Practice using a critical lens (Schieble et al., 2020, p.55)
7.5	Prior to Week 9	Participants will read one another's reflections from meeting #7		Sharing the Burden

8	Week 9	Analyze transcript and participant reflections from meeting #7 (see table 2 & 4);	Meeting #8 Notes	Practice critical reflection and Racial literacy
9	Week 10	Watch video: <i>How to Deconstruct Racism</i> (Thurston, 2019); Notice, name, and rethink institutional structures of whiteness (i.e. hiring practices, professional development, etc.) use final 10 minutes for writing self-reflections (5 Qs)	Transcript of Meeting #9; Participant reflection #5	Challenge assumptions, illuminate power, uncover hegemony (Brookfield, 2017) Challenge the dominant paradigm in education (Thomas Kuhn)
9.5	Prior to Week 11	Participants will read one another's reflections from meeting #9		Sharing the Burden
10	Week 11	Analyze transcript and participant reflections from meeting #9 (see table 2 & 4);	Meeting #10 Notes	Practice critical reflection and Racial literacy
11	Week 12	Develop action items and timeline for next steps; use final 10 minutes for writing self-reflections (5 Qs)	Transcript of Meeting #11; Participant reflection #6	Problematizing (Schieble et al.,2020, p.75)
11.5	Prior to Week 14	Participants will read one another's reflections from meeting #11		Sharing the Burden
12	Week 14	Analyze transcript and participant reflections from meeting #11 (see table 2 & 4);	Meeting #12 Notes	Practice critical reflection and Racial literacy

Table 2  
*Meeting Notes Chart*

<p><b>Transcripts Being Analyzed:</b></p> <p>(a) Meeting Transcript # ____</p> <p>(b) Nina's Reflection # ____</p> <p>(c) Cathy's Reflection # ____</p> <p>(d) Lisa's Reflection # ____</p> <p>(e) Jane's Reflection # ____</p> <p>(f) Susie's Reflection # ____</p>
<p><b>Genres - "Ways of Interacting"</b> – taking turns, reacting, responding, interrupting, withdrawing, etc.*</p>
<p><b>Guiding Questions:</b> Who asks questions? What type of questions are asked? How do topics change? Who changes the topics? How are topics explored or built upon? How are participants</p>

brought into the conversation? Are multiple perspectives considered? Are opinions linked to external evidence?		
<u>Transcript and Line # and text</u>	<u>Note about text</u>	<u>Possible Code</u>
<b>Discourse - “Ways of Representing”</b> – how ideas about race are represented through language*		
<b>Guiding Questions:</b> How do we talk about ourselves racially? How do we talk about others racially? How do we define racism? How do we identify racism within the program? What ideas get silenced or skipped? How do we connect our racial history to our program?		
<u>Transcript and Line # and text</u>	<u>Note about text</u>	<u>Possible Code</u>
<b>Style - “Ways of Being”</b> – how participants represent themselves and their ideas through language*		
<b>Guiding Questions:</b> From what perspective (or whose perspective) are ideas shared? Whose voices are represented? How do we position ourselves? How do we position others? How do we take responsibility (or not) for making changes? How do participants approach the work of this study? How do participants view their role within the work of this study?		
<u>Transcript and Line # and text</u>	<u>Note about text</u>	<u>Possible Code</u>

\* Analysis should include consideration of local, institutional and societal implications

Table 3  
*Participant Reflection Protocol*

<b>DIRECTIONS:</b> As you answer the following questions, think in terms of 3 dimensions: local, institutional, and societal. Participants will attempt to answer all five questions within the given time.	
1	What new perspectives did you gain today?
2	What are you noticing about your own opinions? Are they informed knowledge?
3	How are you shifting from a personal perspective to looking at a broader societal perspective?
4	Did you notice any defensive feelings? Why?
5	How do your own social positions (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status) inform your perspective?

Questions derived from Schieble et al. (2019, p. 38)

Table 4  
*Inductive Analysis Procedure*

<b>Time Allotted</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Procedure</b>
10 min.	Examine meeting transcript for “Ways of Interacting”	Participants identify line of text that is an example of “interacting,” offer an observation, and record the observation in the notes.
15 min.	Examine meeting transcript and participant reflections for “Ways of Representing”	Participants identify line of text that is an example of “representing,” offer an observation, and record the observation in the notes.
15 min.	Examine meeting transcript and participant reflections for “Ways of Being”	Participants identify line of text that is an example of “being,” offer an observation, and record the observation in the notes.
15 min.	Generate possible Codes	Participants look over the notes generated for each section and offer possible codes. Codes will only be recorded if there is consensus among the group members.

### **Plans for Data Analysis**

Data analysis took place in two phases: (1) Participant Action Research Analysis - throughout the study in a recursive and co-constructed manner with all participants and (2) Thematic Analysis -- summative analysis conducted by the researcher. Phase one of data analysis is depicted in Table 4 where participants used aspects of critical discourse studies to analyze meeting transcripts and participant reflections produced in the prior meeting. The analysis consisted of group members identifying textual evidence to support an observation regarding interactions, representations, or ways of being. Notes about the observation were recorded next to the corresponding text by participants. Participants then began to identify codes or recurring themes as part of the note-taking process (Rogers & Mosley, 2014). The third column did not end up being utilized as planned (see Table 2). Instead, participant comments about possible codes or themes were recorded in

a separate cell beneath each set of textual analysis. This alternative came up during the second meeting and was utilized the remained of the study.

Drawing on the work of Fairclough (2011) and Rogers and Mosley (2014) the participants utilized questions regarding each level of analysis to guide their work (see table 2). For example, when looking at the level of *genres* or “ways of interacting” the participants were asked questions like: Who asks questions? What type of questions are asked? How do topics change? Who changes the topics? How are topics explored or built upon? How are participants brought into the conversation? Are multiple perspectives considered? Are opinions linked to external evidence? These questions helped us analyze the transcript text for the patterns of interactions among participants in relation to social dynamics of power, in other words with a critical lens.

At the level of *discourse* or “ways of representing,” the participants explored questions such as: How do we talk about ourselves racially? How do we talk about others racially? How do we define racism? How do we identify racism within the program? What ideas get silenced or skipped? How do we connect our racial history to our program? This line of questioning helped the group identify how we were making sense of the world through ideological beliefs.

Lastly, the level of *style* or “ways of being” was drawn out by questions like: From what perspective (or whose perspective) are ideas shared? Whose voices are represented? How do we position ourselves? How do we position others? How do we take responsibility (or not) for making changes? How do participants approach the work of this study? How do participants view their role within the work of this study? The

purpose of these questions was to notice how participants were reacting or responding to the discourse of this study.

Phase two of data analysis occurred at the end of the study once all the data was collected, including the critical analysis conducted by the group (see table 2). At this point, the researcher returned to the data to perform a critical thematic analysis of the entire data set, consolidating, reducing, and interpreting as a process for making meaning (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). After initial coding or open coding, I looked for categories or themes among the codes by sorting them into groups of similarity as they related to the purpose of the study and the research questions. The categories came from exact words from the participants, my observations, and from the literature that supported this study. Awareness of my biases and limited viewpoint was of particular import during this naming and sorting process. All data relevant to the study was sorted into categories or subcategories to ensure reliability. Categories were developed so that no data could be placed in more than one category. Careful consideration was given to the names of categories so that they were as exact and specific to the data included. Lastly, the congruence of the categories was maintained so that the levels of abstraction match.

After the categories were identified, the researcher theorized how the categories were related to one another. Developing a visual model can be useful and helpful with this process. The researcher kept in mind the importance of analyzing the data within the context of the study to mitigate the challenge of ambiguity. In other words, the model developed needed to be specific to the data collected and the purpose of the study.

Models were developed for participant responses to reflection questions two and five.

In order to ensure credibility, reliability, and validity, or the degree to which instruments measured what was purported, this study was based on research conducted by other teams (Allan & Estler, 2002; Rogers & Mosley, 2014; Schieble et al, 2020;). In order to achieve construct validity a study needs to be grounded in interrelated theoretical concepts. This study was founded on Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness studies, and Racial Literacy studies as discussed in chapter one. Catalytic validity relates to the extent to which the research results in conscientization (Friere, 1970). In other words, a study is valid if the impact of the study brings about a deeper understanding of the world and its conflicting nature. The purpose of this study was to bring about a shift in participants' awareness and deepen their knowledge of how racialized the world is in order to help the program evolve its practices. Lather (1986) explains that catalytic validity also refers to the degree to which participation in the research will move participants to a new understanding through self-awareness that results in agency. This study was specifically designed to achieve self-knowledge leading to action, and the impact of this study on the participants will be further discussed in chapters four and five. Additionally, when considering face validity, member checks provide an additional measure of whether the results seem plausible, and our collaborative analysis every other week served as a member check. Belone et al. (2016) studied face validity as it applied to community-based participatory research, and they identified four constructs: trust development, capacity, mutual learning, and power dynamics. Their findings support and were adaptable to this study. This study involved participants building trust with one another, developing a critical capacity, taking a learner stance together, and continually examining the power dynamics within the group and the greater context in which the

group functions. This study involved five educational experts collaboratively and recursively examining the data to co-construct the analysis resulting in dependability, or support for conclusions.

The design of this study also considered the criteria offered by Lichtman (2013) to: be explicit about role of researcher and the relationship to those being studied, make a case for why the research is important, be clear about how the study is done, and have a convincing presentation of findings. As the researcher, I was aware of the need to be a participant in the study to help mitigate the power dynamics involved. This research was important because unless the department makes intentional changes to its program, it will continue to perpetuate white supremacy and benefit from it. This chapter articulates clearly how the study was conducted and how the presentation of the findings will be discussed later in this chapter. As Wolcott (1994) suggests, a study is reliable by finding plausible interpretations impelled by the search for understanding. This study was motivated by the search for understanding how a department might employ a critical conversation inquiry group to confront and dismantle whiteness within its curricular and pedagogical practices.

This study did not seek to produce generalizable results. The conditions of this study were particular to the context in which it took place, the department in which researcher works. This is why a pilot test was not conducted. This study relied on a department that committed to completing the entire process and conducting one portion of this study with any group would have left the participants with a fragmented and insufficient experience. Likewise, the results would not have been useful.



The intended audience for this research is colleagues in the field of higher education. The findings, in chapter four and five will describe procedures employed, answer the research questions based on data analysis, provide commentary on the results, and make suggestions for future research. Due to the participatory and collaborative nature of this study, the ethical considerations needed to include whether all voices would be heard and the relationship between participants and the researcher (Lincoln, 1995). As previously mentioned, part of the procedure for this study was regular dialogue and analysis regarding the power dynamics within the group, and this is how the ethical concerns were addressed throughout the study.

Additionally, protection of subjects from harm, the right to privacy, informed consent and issues of deception, collection of data, and dissemination of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) all needed to be considered as part of an ethical study. Participants signed a consent form which clearly stated their right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. Names were replaced with pseudonyms on all data collected. No harm was anticipated; however, this endeavor has been known to cause discomfort and is often a sign of efficacy (Benson & Fiarman, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; DiAngelo, 2018). Participants were made aware of this on the consent form. Identifying markers were removed in the findings, and data was secured and password-protected on the researcher's laptop.

Because this study regarded racial bias and inequity, the researcher acknowledged the inevitability of racial bias in the study. There was a real danger that a white supremacist position would be reinforced because all participants were white and were socialized in a racialized world. The following elements were embedded in the study to

mitigate bias as much as possible. **Co-construction.** All participants conducted preliminary analysis of transcripts in a collaborative format to help the participants, including the researcher, avoid the bias that may have occurred if only one person conducted the analysis. **Recursive.** The study included a process which engaged the group in a second look at the participants' language, dynamics, and choices specifically with an eye on power. **Self-reflection.** The study contained opportunities for all participants (including the researcher) to examine and name biases through the process of reflecting (see table 3).

This study was conducted within one department, which means the results are specific to the department. Although the results could prove informative to other departments, the results are not meant to be adopted and put into practice in the absence of another department engaging in their own self-study. Another limitation to this study was fitting within time constraints of participant availability. The timing affected the extent to which the group developed deep levels of capacity. The department decided to continue their work beyond the scope of the study once they realized the potential of an ongoing initiative, but this was not an expectation at the outset.

### **Summary**

This study was developed as a way to launch an initiative that was missing and vitally needed within the higher education community where the researcher currently works. Using critical participatory action research the researcher brought together the fields of Critical Race theory, Racial Literacy studies, and Critical Whiteness studies to form a study that investigates how an academic department might critically interrogate its curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices in a collaborative inquiry group.

This study intended to answer the following research questions: (1) How do faculty within an Educational Studies department think about their racial identities and the relevance of racial identity to the program, the institution, and higher education? (2) How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop critical self-reflection? (3) How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop racial literacy? (4) How does participation in a critical conversation inquiry group affect curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices made by Educational Studies faculty? How this study might contribute to the academic conversation regarding higher education faculty development of critical capacities and higher education critical program review will be discussed in chapter six.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS of Research Question One & Three**

The purpose of this study was to confront and dismantle whiteness and racism in an Educational Studies department's curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices using a critical conversation inquiry group. In this chapter, the findings will be presented in reference to two of the four research questions. The findings related to the first research question illustrate how participants thought about their racial identity and its relation to the program, institution, and higher education. The findings related to the third research question chronicle how participants developed racial literacy. Research questions 1 and 3 have been grouped together in this chapter because of the similarities between the way participants examined their racial identity and developed racial literacy. In other words, to the extent a person recognized their racial identity and its relationship to the system, that person was better able to develop racial literacy.

The findings will be referenced with the following abbreviations. Quotes from meeting transcripts are labeled (MT). Excerpts from meeting notes are labeled (MN). Evidence from participant reflections is labeled (PR). For example, a quote from line 37 of meeting transcript three would be labeled (MT3, line 37). Gender neutral language like "they" and "them" will be used to mask the gender of the participants since there was one male in the group. Pseudonyms have been added instead of participant's real names.

### **Research Question One - Racial Identity and Its Relation to the Program**

The first research question (How do faculty within an Educational Studies department think about their racial identities and the relevance of racial identity to the program, the institution, and higher education?) was designed to uncover how participants conceptualized their racial identity and understood the relevance of their

racial identity in relation to their work. The participants' interactions related to racial identity revealed the following categories: (a) racial emotional intelligence, (b) discomfort, (c) discussing the other, (d) discussion of power, (e) discussion of privilege, (f) racial socialization, and (g) acknowledging racial connection to a system. In the sections that follow I will provide evidence for each category.

### **Racial emotional intelligence**

One aspect of white supremacist culture is the practice and expectation of detaching from one's emotions (Menakem, 2017). An underdeveloped racial emotional intelligence can block or hinder dialogue. Therefore, it was important to understand the baseline of the participants' emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is characterized by awareness, control, and expression, and whiteness tends to focus on emotional control while minimalizing awareness and expression. When given the opportunity to discuss their racial identity within the context of emotion, the responses varied by participant with some staying within the range of control while others shared their awareness.

The entry point to the conversation specifically directed at emotional intelligence centered on excerpts from the book *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018, p.103-104; 119-121). As facilitator, I began the conversation by saying, "Part of what I'm learning to do is to notice how I'm feeling when I'm in a space" (MT1, line 215-216). Participants were then given an opportunity to practice noticing and naming their emotional experience. Each participant had a different way of exploring their emotions.

One participant shared how they felt during a meeting where someone described how a policy decision was racially insensitive. "I remember feeling so uncomfortable

because I felt accused of being a part of that” (MT1, lines 241-242). They went on to say, “I felt bad and guilty about the fact that I didn’t know any better” (MT1, line 242).

Another participant shared their emotional response to being in a conversation about race. They said, “I feel embarrassed and shame” (MT1, line 284).

During a group reflection-session a second participant noted, “If we don’t feel safe, we bottle it up” (MN4). They also shared, “It’s scary to make a mistake because of how you can be labeled” (MN4). In a later reflection session that same group member explained, “I get shy when people don’t respond, if it’s a group I’m not familiar with” (MN10).

A third participant discussed guilt and sadness. For example, “the other thing that was resonating with me was just like the idea of guilt” (MT1, lines 109-110). They went on to say, “you don’t need to take on the shame and the guilt unless you have been, you know, being horrible and actively racist and things” (MT1, lines 111-113). Besides talking about guilt, the participant explored sadness. “One of the feelings like, I feel like is like sadness, like an overwhelming sense of sadness” (MT1, lines 254-255). They go on to explore the emotion further through rhetorical questions, “like scared or angry? Or am I sad because I’m angry? Because it’s so frustrating? Or am I sad because I’m like I’m feeling judged?” (MT1, lines 258-260).

A fourth participant used the word disappointed to characterize their feelings when asked to examine their emotional state. “I am disappointed that we have so far yet to go” (MT1, line 296). They added, “I’m disappointed that the police officer shot that young man in the back seven times” (MT1, line 297). They were referring to Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old black man, who was shot by police while his children watched from

the car. The same group member continued, “Like after George Floyd, like I’m disappointed to the core” (MT1, line 298).

A fifth participant responded to the dialogue about dismantling whiteness by combatting the norm of detaching from our emotions by stating, “bringing up that idea that emotions aren’t being used is fascinating” (MT1, lines 234-235). The group was not asked to discuss their emotional state regarding their racial identity at any other point in the study, and they did not bring it up on their own. So, when directed to discuss emotion, participants complied, but adopting a new practice of noticing and naming underlying emotions was not a skill developed through this study. One question within the participant reflection protocol asked about defensiveness, so participants reflected on that emotional reaction every other week. Results from the participant reflections will be discussed in the section on developing critical self-reflection.

### **Discomfort**

Participants were willing to discuss their discomfort when prompted to do so as well. For example, when asked to consider their racial identity within the context of conversations about race, participants discussed examples of how they felt when faced with their own lack of knowledge. One participant shared, “I don’t know if I really want to out myself about how much I think I need to know” (MT1, line 287-288). Another participant said, “I didn’t feel comfortable asking them questions about it because I thought they probably already think I should know this stuff” (MT1, line 246-248). The speaker was referring to fellow faculty who spoke with fluency about social identity awareness. These kinds of comments were the result of a conversation at the very beginning of the study where we asked ourselves to take notice of how we functioned as

white people when race is being discussed. Notice that the discomfort was about coming across as ignorant, which is characteristic of a non-learner stance.

Participants also voiced their discomfort with the study with statements like, “If you don’t want to give me more focus, that’s fine” (MT11, line 352). There was desire on the part of some participants to make sure they were participating the right way. One participant identified when their discomfort was being accommodated. The participant noted, “The guy in the video accommodated me and my white fragility. I liked that” (MN10, line 27-28). This statement shows a great deal of self-awareness and illustrates the deep level of background knowledge they brought to the study.

### **Discussing the other**

When asked to discuss our racial identity, especially during meetings one and five, some group members made several references to an “other” in reference to their own upbringing and racial development. In this case, the “other” included black Americans, people from countries other than the United States, white extremists, and students. For example, one participant chose to point out their amazement of extreme opinions posted by friends and acquaintances on social media, “very survivalist-type people, like the world’s gonna end so they have their bunker and they’re going to take care of themselves” (MT1, lines 226-227). This appeared to be an attempt at positioning oneself as not an extremist, not an “other.” Another participant shared a concern about how their family named the other, “we called them Mexicans as opposed to lawn care professionals” (MT5, line 137-138). This participant seemed to be unpacking their racial identity in relation to how they referred to the “other.”



Some participants spoke about their awareness that white racial identity is not neutral. For example, one participant spoke about a black friend who could “pass as a white person” (MT5, line 87) to illustrate their awareness that white people are given preferential treatment. Another participant commented on the way a panel of African students speaking with white faculty shaped their comments to accommodate white fragility. “The whole panel were so patient with us” (MT1, line 296). These two group members showed awareness of how their white racial identity is perceived and functions within a racialized society.

In both meetings when we discussed our racial identities or autobiographies, there was more discussion of the “other.” Some participants brought up having housekeepers, drivers, and wait staff and how they perceived that experience as a child versus now. “I was raised to think the world of these people” (MT5, line 263). Although there was more discussion of the “other,” there were glimpses of awareness within those moments. One participant noted, “we tokenize and then expect them also to be a representative and to be an expert on a topic” (MT1, line 152-153). The topic they were referring to was race. Another participant reflected, “in my comments, it came out sounding like still like us and them, in a way” (MT5, line 255). This participant was able to see how they unconsciously framed their experiences through a racial lens that centered the white person. When thinking back on their upbringing, one participant was able to clearly articulate the division between whites and people of color, “and they were the other” (MT5, line 299). They were not only aware of this division when writing their autobiography but as a child.

During the sessions where we examined the transcript from the previous meeting, the group became more aware of our capacity to discuss our racial identity. One person noticed we made reference to the student position and wondered if that was avoiding our own position (MN4). This was a key shift because although centering the student is a desire within the department, avoiding discussion of faculty complicity to the system or our racial identities is a backwards step. During the meeting where we analyzed our dialogue about our racial autobiographies, one participant noticed that when we talked about our own race it was in reference to an “other” (MN6). Two weeks later, the same participant brought up their discomfort when the group was naming people outside the department as problematic, wanting to defend the faculty’s ignorance, but considering that might be white fragility (MN8). By our tenth meeting, we noticed we had progressed in our language and spoke more in recognition of our racial identities whereas before we spoke of the “other” (MN10). If it wasn’t for the participants who made the observations about our tendency to focus on the “other” and helped us revisit our racial identities, the group would not have been able to take responsibility for the developing action items and enacting them.

### **Discussion of power**

Noticing and naming the relationship between power and racial identity was an intentional aspect of this study. Among the group members, there was some recognition of how we think about our power in relation to our racial identity. After one participant shared an example of how they position the “other” to share their racial stories, another participant articulated how their racial identity has been shaped by a colonizing mentality. They explained, “the reason I’m mindful about inviting individuals who are

BIPOC to sort of tell me their stories is because I'm trying to, again, colonize their knowledge" (MT1, lines 190-191). They were sharing this as an example of the ways in which their white racial identity within a racialized society positions them to make a choice about how they use their power in relation to BIPOC individuals.

Two weeks later, participants developed an analogy related to a microphone as a way to consider their power. In response to one participant who shared their efforts to empower minorities in their work, another participant said, "I see that being aware of, so who gets airtime? Who gets the microphone?" (MT3, lines 153-154). The speaker goes on to say, "the microphone needs to be passed, right?" (MT3, lines 155-156). Later in the discussion another participant offers, "maybe our role is to put the microphone down and simply listen" (MT3, lines 191-192). This was an attempt at pointing out a misunderstanding or misappropriation of power. The speaker goes on to say, "maybe that is dismantling whiteness, learning to put the microphone down" (MT3, lines 193-194).

In a later meeting, as we discussed our racial autobiographies, we asked ourselves what assumptions or beliefs we could notice and then tied those to societal ideologies. One participant was trying to make sense of whether pity was based on a certain assumption or belief. To combat pity, the speaker posited, "creating opportunities for others to be able to have agency and self-efficacy" (MT5, lines 211-212) would be a better approach. The language signifies the speaker is the one who has the control and is in a position to create opportunities for others, but there is no mention or acknowledgment by any participants of this language of power. This comment remained unexamined until my analysis.

### **Discussion of privilege**

A closely related concept to power is privilege. The concept of privilege was not introduced from any of the prepared texts. It was raised initially by one participant and then echoed by other participants. Depending on the participant's familiarity with the concept of privilege, there was a varying degree of awareness and willingness to examine privilege. For example, one participant was comparing their experience to a black person's and asked, "I'm suddenly, because I'm a white American, responsible for understanding my country's history and background and being an expert on that?" (MT1, lines 149-150). The speaker thought they were being empathetic, but it is an example of privilege because the speaker assumed no responsibility for being educated and white. Another example of privilege entered into our discussions falls into the category of naming it without taking responsibility for being a part of the system. For example, "we're just sort of like recipients of how white society has made everything. And so, by having white skin we just are benefitted by it" (MT1, lines 186-187). Because the group did not dig into this statement, it's difficult to know whether the speaker would have taken responsibility for their connection and complicity with the system if they'd been asked about it.

There was a progression for one participant who was better able to identify their privilege. For example, they noticed when reexamining their autobiography, "Like we had tennis lessons with the number three player in the country" (MT5, lines 287-288). It was a recognition of access and privilege. Another speaker made a realization as well during their second look of their racial autobiography, "I also noticed how I claimed my privilege but no responsibility for it" (MT5, lines 287-288). This shows awareness of privilege without consideration of complicity or impact.

We also described and defined what privilege meant. For example, one participant stated, “I also was thinking about just like my privilege to be able to like go in and out of these feelings” (MT5, lines 305-306). They go on to explain, “when it gets awkward, I can redirect and think about something else” (MT5, lines 319-320). When looking at our transcript from meeting #5, one participant noted that we talked about our experience from the frame of privilege because we were only talking about race (MN6). One participant brought the discussion further by asking rhetorically, “If I had to put my money where my mouth is, would I be prepared to give up my home?” (MT5, lines 316-317). They were illustrating that it is easier to name the privilege than to take meaningful action. For our group, the ability to name our privilege, recognize whether that awareness resulted in meaningful action, and involved an understanding of how we are not separate from the system was equal to our ability to examine and unpack our racial identity.

### **Racial socialization**

Similarly, whenever we discussed our awareness and understanding of our racial socialization it was an indicator of the extent to which we grasped our racial identities and their relationship to our work. Although our group had difficulty noticing our racial identities in relation to whiteness, we were able to acknowledge that we had formative experiences that socialized and shaped us. For example, one participant was thinking back on their upbringing and trying to figure out why they had not engaged with anyone BIPOC. “That was potentially the relationship for why I wasn’t interacting with those people” (MT5, 133). The speaker assumed the lack of interaction was because they did not live near or go to school or church with anyone BIPOC, but there was no mention of how intentional that separation was and still is in society.

Some participants were able to acknowledge more easily their racial socialization as soon as it was pointed out. For example, in our first meeting when we viewed a talk about white fragility, one participant shared, “I realize now, how could I not have a racist viewpoint?” (MT1, line 167). Although the speaker did not explain further what viewpoints they had learned, they were able to apply the ideas from the video to understand their racial socialization. On the other hand, when discussing our racial autobiographies, one participant recognized how socialization happened for their children when they stated, “so I know he probably picked it up from television more than likely” (MT5, lines 165-166). However, the participant did not acknowledge the possibility that they too had been shaped by media.

As facilitator I attempted to introduce a discussion about how we are socialized to avoid emotion. I said, “One of the things I’m aware of that is part of white culture is an avoidance of emotion” (MT1, lines 214-215). However, this comment never led to any discussion of how the participants were raised or socialized to avoid emotion. It was brought up by one participant in their reflection at the end of that day’s session. They stated, “Today’s discussion was interesting for me to consider how socialization in a Western culture sterilizes knowledge from emotion and feeling, Positivism (PR1, c). This participant was often insightful in their reflections but did not share their thoughts verbally within the discussions as much.

Other observations about racial socialization came from our more verbally active participant who noted how they were given an “early message of equality as equaling sameness, posited within assimilation” (MT5, lines 92-93). Because of this they developed the value of compliance and fitting in. They go on to explain the messaging

from their parents and other adults was, “We’re all the same as God’s children” (MT5, line 94). This was the clearest example of someone in the group recalling how they were raised to think in a way that socialized them racially, and specifically mentioned a religious ideology. Another participant shared, “and I was just recognizing that sense of superiority and just how much it creeps up inside of me on a regular basis” (MT5, 334-335). This statement shows awareness of a problematic mentality but not of how it was encouraged and promoted societally.

### **Acknowledging racial connection to a system**

This category reveals a blind spot more than an accomplishment. Blind spots will be discussed further in the section on developing racial literacy. Being able to recognize one’s racial connection to a system, namely whiteness, is how we could have considered the relevance our racial identity had with the program we provide. On the one hand, our connection to the system was brought up as an unfortunate happenstance. “Just an observation of how our lives could disadvantage us just without it being our fault” (MT3, lines 373-374). Another comment revealed a misunderstanding that racism is only a national issue. The speaker said, “none of this was in the United States” (MT5, line 282). In other words, the speaker was surprised that whiteness was functioning in their earlier life in a country other than the United States.

On the other hand, a participant brought up a clear connection to the system. “I also recognize that much of what I do is not just white privilege but white supremacy” (MT1, line 168-169). This shows some awareness but does not recognize that white supremacy leads to white privilege. When discussing the system of racism we were raised in and live in, another speaker explained, “It’s not our fault, but it is our

responsibility” (MT1, line 122-123). This was one of the few connections made between racial identity and the system; however, the blind spot that persisted was that we also uphold racism through our actions and unexamined beliefs.

In summary, findings related to the first research question show how we each understood our racial identity and its connection to our work. Each participant had very different reactions to this process depending on their upbringing, racial awareness, and background knowledge (see chart below).

<b>Participant</b>	<b>discussed the discomfort of racial conversations</b>	<b>examined their emotional intelligence</b>	<b>noticed the tendency to discuss the other as racial</b>	<b>acknowledged privilege</b>	<b>identified examples of their own racial socialization</b>	<b>looked at their connection to the system of racism</b>
<b>Cathy</b>	Aware of the way others accommodate white fragility	Found this difficult to do	Brought up by Cathy	Had a clear understanding of their privilege and the impact	Had a clear understanding of this and willing to explore further	Aware and willing to understand better
<b>Jane</b>	Never voiced discomfort	Liked the idea of it	Understood Cathy’s observation	Beginning to understand the concept and was willing	Beginning to understand the concept and was willing to explore it	Unaware and willing but not ready to do alone
<b>Susie</b>	Willing to lean into the discomfort	Was able to examine multiple emotions	Agreed with Cathy and brought it up during other meetings	Had a clear understanding of their privilege and the impact	Already somewhat versed in the concept; Willing to explore further	Aware and willing to understand better
<b>Lisa</b>	Felt worried about making mistakes	Shared past experiences, not present feelings	Didn’t seem to understand the significance	Had trouble with saying they were privileged	Had difficulty understanding and facing this for themselves	Unaware and not ready to consider yet
<b>Nina</b>	Remembers feeling ignorant in the past	Shared emotions from past and present	Agreed with Cathy and brought it up in	Had a clear understanding of their privilege and the impact	Already somewhat versed in the concept; Willing to	Aware and willing to understand better



			other meetings		explore further	
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Jane and Lisa were the two participants who had the least background knowledge about the concept of racial identity and its connection to systemic racism, but Jane more easily understood and learned from our work because their approach lacked defensiveness. Jane trusted the group and the process. Jane also wasn't trying to prove anything to the group, or themselves. In other words, Jane approached the work from a learner's stance. Cathy, Susie, and Nina brought background knowledge and a learner's stance to the study which allowed them to explore their racial identity and its relationship to the system. Cathy was the one who was able to notice our tendency to discuss the "other" more than ourselves because of Cathy's work in indigenous studies for several years. All group members were able participants when it came to confronting whiteness within the program and higher education, but it was only the group members who recognized and openly discussed their complicity with the system that could begin to envision how to dismantle whiteness.

**Researcher's Observation**

The lack of overt religious reference throughout the study lines up with my experience as a Christian Scientist. I was raised to discuss Christian Science concepts openly when prompted or invited to but not under other circumstances. Had I inserted a question for us to discuss that was specific to examining how our religious background relates to our racial identity, that could have been part of the study. Implications of this will be discussed in chapter six.

**Research Question Three - Racial Literacy**

The third research question for this study (How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversations inquiry group develop racial literacy?) focused on how participants developed racial literacy. Racial literacy is the skill or ability to detect and discuss racism (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013) as well as the system of whiteness that perpetuates racism (Arday, 2018). Categories that answer this research question were developed through analytical coding. The categories are (a) How We Interacted, (b) Upholding Whiteness, (c) Uncovering Blind Spots, (d) Identifying Whiteness, (e) Disrupting and Dismantling Whiteness, (f) Entry Points, (g) Conceptual Understanding, (h) Understanding Our Responsibility, (i) Recognizing Our Socialized, Constructed Racial Identities, (j) Non-binary Thinking, and (k) Pain Points. Similar to the findings from the first research question, results varied depending on the participant. In other words, the group was able to advance its understanding of racial literacy, but depending on how each participant approached the study, there were varying degrees of further development of racial literacy. Findings from each category are given below.

### **How we interacted**

One aspect of racial literacy is being able to discuss racism and whiteness, and this category documents how we interacted with one another as a group during our discussions of race. There were seven distinct examples of how we interacted: checking in, making space, active listening, asking follow-up questions, acknowledging new connections, building on one another's ideas, and being cordial. Most of these categories are suggested as effective communication tools in any conversation (Bolton, 2011).

For example, as the study progressed, we learned to check in with one another. "Cathy and Suzie, what are you thinking about?" (MT7, lines 271-272). In another

meeting a different participant checked in. “Are we ready to switch gears? Jane, anything you wanted to add?” (MT11, lines 295-296). There were also instances where we made space for each other through pauses or invitations. For example, “Everyone else is welcome to chime in” (MT5, line 199). This participant knew we were waiting while they opened a document and made space for us to comment on what they had just brought up. During an analysis of a previous meeting, one participant noted that they saw the pauses in the transcript as an invitation to go somewhere else (MN2). In a later meeting, a participant further explained their view of pauses as honoring what was said. They went on to say it was a shift away from whiteness (MN10).

Additional skills our group utilized that show how we developed racial literacy were active listening and asking follow-up questions. For example, upon examination of our transcripts, our group noted that we valued the times when we paraphrased and summarized in response to one another (MN 2 and MN 6). However, this did not happen with much frequency. We also noted whether we were asking follow-up questions. In meeting notes two and ten we discussed the lack of follow-up questions. One participant offered that because each meeting began with a prompt, we didn’t think of about asking other questions or taking it in another direction (MN 2). Another participant speculated that maybe we assumed we understood each other (MN10) and that is why we didn’t ask follow-up questions. One participant asked, “Can you expand on that a little bit more?” (MT7, line 29) This is an example of asking for clarification and is one of the few examples of a follow-up question.

Our group did listen to one another, and this is evidenced through the acknowledgments of each other’s ideas and building off those ideas. For example, one

participant responded to another by saying, “How exciting that those terms are having meaning within the context of this conversation” (MT9, lines 320-321). Another example of acknowledging a fellow participant’s comments is, “What you’re able to do is apply this to what it might look like in a teacher’s practice” (MT3, 274-275). There were other observations of how opportunities were missed, such as, “I noticed that I skipped Jane’s idea about the connection between white supremacy and schedules, and I didn’t connect it until reading the transcript” (MN10). Because of the structure of the study, participants had a second chance to notice what fellow participants said.

Building off one another’s ideas is additional evidence of how we interacted in our discussion of race. During a back-and-forth exchange about stereotypes related to Mexican-Americans, one participant added, “an uglier truth behind it might also be motivation for what they want to do versus how the openings we’ve created for them in society for them to be what they’re capable of” (MT5, line 181-183). This statement is an example of how the speaker built on the previous idea using the words “might also be” which introduced an alternative perspective and gave greater clarity about their beliefs.

When looking at our meeting notes, our observations showed a progression in our dialogical style. For example, after our first meeting we noted that we referred to one another’s ideas (MN2). After our third meeting we noted more dialogue and interaction back and forth and building off what the previous person said (MN4). In our final meeting, we noted, “It sounded much more like a conversation rather than sharing individual perspectives” (MN12) and “In the past we changed topics with each new speaker. This time there was more intermingling and a variety of skills, building off each

other with a great deal of respect. We've gone above and beyond where we started" (MN12).

The last example of how we interacted is cordially. This was articulated during our fourth meeting when participants said, "We don't have much controversy" (MN4) and "We are cordial with each other" (MN4). I am also aware of what did not occur. We did not interrupt or argue with one another. However, we did challenge each other, so although it did not appear on the surface that there was much controversy, there was one group member in particular, Cathy, who knew how to challenge fellow group members. Discussion of the implications of this cordial tone will take place in chapter six.

### **Upholding whiteness**

Racial literacy includes an awareness of whiteness. This next category consists of examples of participants upholding whiteness or not being aware of how whiteness is upheld in a variety of ways. Robin DiAngelo (2018) would call these examples of white fragility. The examples can be labeled as avoidance of discomfort, maintaining ignorance, defensiveness, control, not listening, unquestioning, and relinquishing responsibility.

Participants described ways in which they could see how whiteness functions through avoidance. For example, one participant observed, "that's squishing the issue under the carpet" (MT1, line 231) when referring to the way people change Black Lives Matter to all lives matter. Another participant stated, "I think we've historically been pretty cautious around here" (MT3, 349-350) as acknowledgement of how avoidance happens within our institution. Another participant wondered, "I haven't told anyone that that's what I'm studying and I'm thinking heaven sakes, why not?" (MT3, 342-343) as

they notice their avoidance of bringing up challenges to the status quo. Another participant shared, “I’m sitting here thinking maybe I’ll pass, right?” (MT1, line 292). This shows awareness of wanting to avoid sharing in the conversation. Another participant attempts to shift the tone of conversation, “I was thinking in a little bit more positive terms of just things we have as a department talked about and shifted over the last couple of years” (MT7, lines 284-286). This participant was more inclined to look at past accomplishments rather than to consider current opportunities to dismantle whiteness.

Another aspect to upholding whiteness is maintaining ignorance (Mills, 1997). Our group illustrated their own ignorance and discussed that of others. For example, one participant was unaware of how their actions maintained ignorance when they said, “it comes out much more authentically in terms of the way our staff receive it and the questions that then they can ask of those black individuals who are presenting” (MT3, lines 132-134). They were explaining that having black people train others about race was better than having white people do it. One statement that illustrates an awareness of ignorance that should not be maintained came from another participant. “We think we can figure out about a person based on the way they look” (MT5, lines 179-180). One participant shared their concern that an administrator within our institution was admittedly ignorant about something he should know. “I gave *them* an earful, and *they* had no idea that that’s how our salaries were ranked” (MT9, lines 358-359).

We uphold whiteness by being defensive when faced with changes and alternative viewpoints (Okun, n.d.). Our dialogue showed it is also easier to recognize when someone else is being defensive. We were able to give examples of when we have seen

others be defensive and uphold whiteness, but not of ourselves. For example, one participant described the reason behind defensiveness in our nation and in academia. “We worry that we're going to lose if we don't remain pure” (MT5, line 228). Another example of resistance to diverse perspectives was described this way: “What I run up against is somebody who can articulate very thoughtfully the reason that students have to spell a certain way and write a certain way” (MT7, lines 150-151). Another participant shared a description of how they have been shut down by defensive whiteness. “We are always confronted with a rash, rational, neutral, intelligent response that silences us” (MT7, lines 347-348). The implications of the way this group was able to find examples of defensiveness in others and not themselves will be further discussed in chapter six.

Assuming a position of power and control is another way we uphold whiteness (Harris, 1993). Examples of this within our dialogue range from statements that assume power without realizing it and statements about how other white people assume control. For example, one participant was explaining, “We’ve consciously used our black staff members to support this process” (MT3, line 136). This statement was made to illustrate how white people have made a choice to position black people, but the speaker was unaware of how this statement was ignorant of their own positioning. They started by using phrases like, “it works so much better if our black staff members are empowered and put in positions to be creative” (MT3, lines 129-130). They explained what the black staff members get to be creative with. “The kind of staff training and presentations that we think would be impactful” (MT3, lines 130-131). And the speaker further clarified, “we put them at the forefront of the work” (MT3, line 131). This narrative is an example of how whiteness functioned in our group through an example of white people remaining

in control and couching it as black empowerment. The group was able to notice how others used their white privilege as a form of control. For example, when describing the contradictory behavior of our community a participant noted, “Let’s have a community gathering and we invite diverse points of view, but if we’re always then evaluating it on our Western ideal of validity and accuracy” (MT7, lines 339-341). This was a recognition of the way white, Western thinking will assume a power position which negates the attempt of being more inclusive and equitable. Ideally the Western thinking can work in balance and cooperatively with multiple perspectives (Kimmerer, 2015).

Once again, our group was able to give examples of what upholding whiteness looks like from a spectator’s point of view rather than findings examples within our own work. These comments revolved around the concept of listening, or rather not listening. For example, when one group member explained that a student of color was being ignored, another group member remarked, “It’s the not listening part that is the whiteness” (MT3, line 195). Another participant noted, “I’m working within a white supremacist institution that doesn’t really want to hear that narrative” (MT3, 343-344). The speaker is aware that whiteness is upheld through turning a deaf ear and attributes that behavior to the institution. Another speaker explains that listening cannot be reduced to merely hearing. “You might be willing to hear other people’s perspectives, but you don’t actually believe that they could ever be true or valid” (MT7, lines 375-377). The group recognized the importance of listening to dismantling whiteness.

Another aspect of upholding whiteness that was illustrated by some of our thinking was compliance or unquestioning loyalty. For example, one participant spoke of the way our institution maintains its systems by adhering to old standards. “We don’t talk



about the adaptive challenges facing us” (MT3, line 341). Our group continued to notice other ways in which whiteness is upheld through an unwillingness to question or change. “Like this is the dominant, so we structure our programs around that” (MT7, lines 103-104). Another speaker added, “We don’t strive to understand better what we’re doing because they have a certain paradigm about what academics looks like” (MT7, lines 173-174). The speakers agree but notice how the second speaker shifts from “we” to “they.” One participant commented on their dissatisfaction of the system but was resigned to a position of compliance. After complaining about the negative impacts, they said, “I understand the structure. I understand where I fit into it” (MT9, lines 293-294). They went on to say, “I understand all of those, all of that rationale” (MT9, 295-296) as if to say there is nothing that can be done about the impact because the system has a logical rationale.

The final example of upholding whiteness that we discussed as a group could be described as relinquishing one’s responsibility. In a course I took from Dr. Matthew Davis at UMSL, he often mentioned the concept of sharing the burden. This section describes the ways in which we avoided sharing the burden. The following statements illustrate the kind of thinking that is fatalistic or removes oneself from responsibility by putting it on others. For example, “Like we saw them as this token person that was responsible for understanding everything about racism and their own race” (MT1, lines 145-146). The speaker recognizes that making someone a spokesperson is wrong but does not mention who is responsible for understanding racism. Another participant noted, “I found the committee kept turning to me to put forward a social justice viewpoint” (MT1, lines 196-197). In this case, the committee was not taking responsibility for being

educated. Another participant's misunderstanding of the responsibility white people should bear said, "Change cannot necessarily be made by white people who have a strong passion for speaking up and trying to have a big impact" (MT3, lines 121-122). The speaker went on to explain the need to involve black people to make changes. Another participant described whiteness as if we had no part in it. "The hidden curriculum that goes on just in all our ways of knowing and enacting education and teaching" (MT3, lines 220-221). And, in a later meeting, a participant stated, "That's just the way academia is and that's the way it will always be" (MT7, line 152). All of these comments are examples of how participants were at times aware of how whiteness is upheld by others and at the same time unaware of their own participation in upholding whiteness.

### **Uncovering blind spots**

It's difficult to confront something you can't see, and part of this study was premised on the question of how we develop the capacity to make our ignorance visible. One of the categories identified through analytical coding of references to racial literacy was our awareness of and ability to recognize blind spots. Blind spots are signals or evidence of an operating belief that needs uncovering and critical analysis applied. Our group had blind spots we did not recognize or critically analyze, but the ones we were able to detect came through the process of considering impact, seeing them in other's actions, considering our privilege, looking at our beliefs, finding examples that affected us, considering the scope and scale of a system, and engaging in dialogue.

As a group, one can see some of our blind spots through our dialogue. In some cases, a group member would point out the blind spot to the speaker, but in other cases the group let it pass. For example, one participant explained that they could recognize

their emotional aversion to having discussions about race but then wanted to convince themselves to be brave through a cognitive process, “Like I get it intellectually” (MT1, lines 288-289). Another participant stated, “I’m struggling to think of emotion words” (MT1, lines 292-293) when given the opportunity to self-examine their feelings during the two exercises we accomplished in the study. This process of self-examination for an emotional reaction uncovered a blind spot for that participant.

In another conversation, one participant was making an observation about using someone’s nationality and occupation to describe the other. “Two different labels that have nothing to do with their identity” (MT5, lines 159-160). Yet, identity is very much linked to one’s nationality and occupation. No one pointed that out, and the participant never mentioned any new understanding. In a later meeting, a different group member had shared their frustration with the system at our institution and asked, “I wonder what parallels there are to that structure and the feelings to white supremacy and whiteness” (MT7, lines 247-248). The speaker did not realize that the structure and subsequent impact were a result of whiteness and white supremacy in action. Once again, no one in the group responded to or followed-up on this comment. It is only through my summative analysis that the blind spot is being made visible.

In an earlier meeting when the group was processing the role that white people play in whiteness, one participant remarked, “It comes off as trying to look good as white people” (MT3, lines 127-128). This observation illustrates that the speaker assumed that if white people take action the result will be others assuming a bad motive. None of us followed up on this statement either. There were nods of agreement and we moved on. However, in that same meeting as the group continued to discuss our role as white

people, a participant asked, “Do we have voices that we are not remembering to pass the microphone to?” (MT3, line 157). The blind spot here is an assumption that white people should control the conversation and decide whom to include. That’s when Cathy challenged the notion that it is the role of the white person to control the microphone. Of all the participants, Cathy was the most likely to challenge the group, and the result was an opportunity for the speaker to see a blind spot.

The remaining examples of blind spots revolved around terminology. One participant used the term nonwhite. “I don’t know if there are any other nonwhite people she could talk to” (MT3, lines 174-175) and no one in the group offered the perspective that using such a term still centers white as dominant. In another meeting the term Caucasian was used. “Whatever we offer, I don’t think we drive away the Caucasian students” (MT11, line 308). No one in the group explained the historical origin and problematic misconceptions that stem from this term. Lastly, when our conversation was focused on rethinking structures built on whiteness, one participant explained, “That’s where my cognitive dissonance kicks in” (MT9, lines 231-233). They were commenting on why they could not or would not use the term whiteness to describe the limited thinking that affects education and marginalizes non-standard learners. In other words, the speaker had trouble connecting the idea that the current standard set up by dominant society is founded on white supremacy.

There was a glimmer of hope. We did have moments when we were able to see our own blind spots. Considering the impact of one’s choices was one way we found we could uncover blind spots. For example, one participant imagined the impact on students who feel shut down in class. They said, “It made me wonder what we have in place in a

classroom that might make a student feel like they only have certain channels that are appropriate” (MT7, lines 205-207). They go on to say, “It made me think how we might be doing that to our students in some ways” (MT7, lines 210-211). Another participant continued the concern with a few questions. “What if they don’t feel comfortable going to their professor? They could go to their advisor. But what if their professor is their advisor?” (MT7, lines 226-227). This line of questioning helps reveal a potential problem in the system. Another participant utilized their imagination of how the system impacts students as compared to faculty. They said, “We might experience disgruntlement or feelings of being not recognized, whereas students who have zero power are hit much worse” (MT7, lines 254-255). This exchange illustrates how considering the impact of a system, on more than just ourselves, helps uncover blind spots. I was especially excited about this conversation during our seventh meeting because it illustrated the kind of thinking we need to engage in more regularly to confront whiteness. We considered our actions and their impact. Additionally, this exchange illustrates the other key piece of the puzzle which is to recognize our complicity with a system.

Inevitably, finding blind spots becomes easier when we can see them in others as is shown by our results. One example of being able to see blind spots more easily in others comes from this comment reacting to a fellow faculty member. “As I stood there, giving my lecture, the student fell asleep. And I’m like, wait. You had one person and you stood and you gave, you did what?” (MT7, lines 181-183). What seemed reasonable to one faculty member was easily seen by another as a blindness to maintaining a time-honored practice of lecturing in a circumstance that made no sense. Another example comes from looking at how their parents approach now seems questionable. They thought

back to their upbringing and realized, “It was more assimilation rather than diversity” (MT1, lines 105-106). They could see how the idea of everyone being a child of God was promoted as a singular way of being. Later, that same participant explained that they could see how the Black Lives Matter movement was not saying other lives do not matter. They said, “thinking through all the racial injustices, like Black Lives Matter, that’s like burning and deserves attention” (MT1, 272-273). Seeing how other people seemed blind to something that clearly needed attention, they said this helped them be alert to what needs attention in their own practice.

When we analyzed our autobiographies, we had an opportunity to look at ourselves from the outside. This had the potential for us to uncover blind spots in a similar fashion to spotting them in others. One participant reflected, “I was so proud of the fact that the United States wasn’t having a problem” (MT5, lines 333-334). That participant’s younger self was unaware of systemic racism in the United States as compared to South Africa’s Apartheid during their current events project in the late 80’s, but upon reflection it was easy to see the flaw in that premise.

One additional example comes from a meeting we all attended in the summer where a white facilitator was interviewing a panel of black alumni. A group member reminded us of something that happened in the talk that related to a passage we looked at in this study where Meister (2017) explained that it was not the job of white people to rescue or help black people, but it is our job to dismantle whiteness. “I realize the facilitator was asking, how can we liberate you rather than how can we dismantle whiteness” (MT3, lines 142-143). We were able to see, because of the study and the example of the panelist, a blind spot related to power.

Another approach we found useful to uncovering blind spots was considering privilege. For example, one participant explained how they consider the authors they chose for course material and engage students in a conversation about this as well. “Now she’s talking about hard things, but it wasn’t hard for her to get to that place of having a voice” (MT11, lines 228-229). This helps them uncover blind spots in their material and recognize the power of privilege. Another participant reflected on our conversation about privilege and shared, “I like the idea that as a white person we can disengage with racial tension. I’m not saying that’s good” (MN2). The recognition of how privilege works, helped participants become aware of a choice they had not noticed was a choice. As we continued to revisit white privilege in conjunction with white fragility, one participant remarked, “What keeps catching me on that is just often that complete neglect of understanding what we’re avoiding” (MT3, lines 216-217). Our blind spots were revealed through these exercises of considering the privilege we had to avoid anything that challenged us.

As we began to look at our beliefs, this continued to help our process of uncovering blind spots. One participant brought up something they had learned over the summer. They said they realized “How hard it is for a person of color to be responsible for bringing forward the things that make them uncomfortable or that they’re unhappy about” (MT1, lines 136-138). This participant was examining their belief about whose responsibility it is to raise questions and develop awareness. Another participant shared how they question their beliefs about teaching and learning to uncover blind spots. “I feel like it’s been this place to constantly check to see how educational cultural hegemony shows up in practice” (MT7, lines 290-292). In a discussion about developing emotional

intelligence, one participant realized the need to examine “why I place values on some emotions over others” (MT3, line 297). In other words, they were looking at their beliefs about emotion. In a different discussion, one participant asked where we get our values that sort and rank higher education faculty into salary groupings, and a fellow participant explained, “It’s all about market value and we’re commodities. And it seems so normal that we don’t even notice” (MT9, lines 352-353). We also discussed how blind spots are supported in general by our unexamined beliefs. One group member articulated, “That supports our beliefs about when does something make sense” (MT5, lines 291-292). They were referring to capitalism as an embedded belief or value. Lastly, a group member remarked, “So, i.e., whiteness is desirable” (MT5, line 91) when they realized how they were raised with the cultural norms of whiteness and taught their value without any awareness.

We also discussed how blind spots become more visible when the negative effects reach us personally or professionally. This approach was suggested as part of our discussions and was introduced as an exercise where we considered “Things that we’ve personally experienced running up against” (MT9, lines 171-172). One participant gave an example of how they’ve been impacted by the way things get scheduled and wondered if they are more alert because it is happened to them. They explained, normally “That’s not something we would take into consideration” (MT9, lines 219-220). In a later discussion one participant summarized, “In other words, if we’re not the one getting marginalized, we might not even notice that it’s happening” (MT11, 48-49). This statement illustrates why blind spots often require intention to uncover.



We also found it useful to understand the scale and scope of the system that creates blind spots and supports their maintenance. One participant explained that although we had identified some of our blind spots, “It still doesn’t mean that we’ve dismantled the white supremacy” (MT9, lines 248-249). They were agreeing that we needed to continue examining the larger system. One participant explained in an earlier meeting that the system is “All the cultural and social preference components that are back there, just making us blind” (MT3, lines 221-222). Another participant commented, “I think we have a long way to go” (MT7, line 332) when assessing the current system compared to the goal of dismantling whiteness. Without this recognition of the larger system, the exercise of uncovering blind spots would lack perspective and context. It is not clear whether recognition of a system equates with understanding that we are part of the system. This will be further discussed in chapter six.

The group noticed that it was through dialogue our efforts to uncover blind spots became possible. One participant noticed, “We’re getting closer to the problem because we can articulate these things and spot them and bring them to a head” (MT9, lines 247-248). Another participant reflected, “Our conversation about theorists really got me to thinking about how white and Western they are” (MN12). Uncovering one’s blind spots requires an exchange of ideas, new inputs, and a chance to reflect which all happen throughout the course of dialogue.

We identified a variety of blind spots throughout our study. For example, as we looked at a document describing white supremacy culture, one participant asked, “Do we catch ourselves saying, you know, the right way to be a Christian Scientist or the right way to be a college student?” (MT3, lines 332-334) One of the attributes listed was ‘only

one right way.’ This helped us identify a blind spot related to a preference towards “one right way.” Another participant brought up, “It’d be interesting to have a discussion in the department. So, what does control mean?” (MT11, lines 81-82). This awareness of control or power emerged as one participant noticed the language we were using as we discussed our role as educators and activists. Another idea that was raised related to our narrow perspective on our hiring practices, especially related to students. “Like when I imagine that white female force going out to apply, who are we hiring?” (MT11, lines 326-327). Upon reflection the idea was offered that “There might be ways to include more students in projects that aren’t the ones who would TA for a class” (MN12). Another observation was made by a participant who wanted to address our earlier conversations about course material. “Taking a look at what messages all that resource material points towards or what the prevailing messages are” (MT11, lines 113-114). And another participant added, “Also then maybe thinking, it’s harder probably, but thinking through what’s not being said” (MT11, lines 117-118). These are a few examples of the blind spots we uncovered together, not by being directly challenged by one another, but rather through co-constructed meaning using shared texts.

### **Identifying whiteness**

Another aspect of developing racial literacy that the group demonstrated was the ability to identify and describe whiteness. Through analytical coding the researcher sorted the data into the following groupings within the category of identifying whiteness: paternalism, exclusivity, superiority, sense of time, containing emotion, myth of objectivity, one right way, sense of space, and a system enacted through policy. The following paragraphs will give examples of each grouping.

Paternalism is enacted through rules and actions that limit a person or a group's growth. We discussed whiteness in the form of paternalism in the following ways. One participant shared, "When I think about the degree structure of the institution, but also within our department, it's quite paternalistic" (MT3, lines 248-249). The speaker went on to explain, "The power is very much taken away from the student" (MT3, lines 253-254). Another example raised by a group member referred to how it feels to be a part of a hierarchical institutional structure that does not meet your needs. "It's just this constant reminder that you're not in charge and you don't matter" (MT7, 259-260). One participant explained what happens when they attempt to advocate for students or fellow colleagues within the structure. "Sometimes we don't even know how the rule was made up and who to talk to when that's getting in our way" (MT3, 252-253). Another concern regarding a paternalistic practice was related to the way faculty are viewed. They spoke of a conversation about "the traditional role of the teacher or educator, especially in higher education, being more of the expert" (MT3, lines 200-201). Also related to the paternalistic nature of academia, one participant noted, "That just did not work for the academic people who think learning means we're sitting lecture style" (MT7, lines 171-172). In other words, the faculty member had difficulty advocating for a more equitable approach. Lastly, the group discussed the ways in which the paternalistic system influences our decision making. "I think it also just affects us in terms of the way we think about meeting the needs of the community" (MT9, lines 277-278). The group was able to identify a variety of examples of whiteness when considering paternalistic practices.

Another aspect of whiteness we were able to recognize was acts of exclusivity. One participant noted that a fellow participant was able to see whiteness when considering whether something was inclusive. They acknowledged, “it’s exactly what you’re talking about which is a lack of inclusivity” (MT9, line 234). Another participant pointed out the way whiteness sets up a system that is exclusive within our pay structure. “We benchmark and pay based on particular criteria, but it’s very narrowly defined” (MT9, lines 266-267). Another participant described the exclusivity of academia regarding knowledge when they said, “such narrow definitions about what making thinking visible really looks like” (MT7, lines 147-148). The speaker went on to refer to academia as a “Club, for lack of a better term” (MT7, line 155).

Recognizing how superiority plays a part in our belief system of whiteness came up a few times. For example, one participant shared how superiority is communicated through comparison of teaching. “There’s this automatic tendency for another discipline to say, well maybe that’s your level of what learning looks like” (MT7, lines 160-161). Another participant explained, “I noticed that even within that, there’s a kind of privileged sense of what counts more” (MT9, lines 272-273). They were referring to faculty evaluation and what measures are treated as superior. Another participant reflected on the findings from their autobiography. “British superiority equaled whiteness” (MT5, lines 296-297). The group recognized how the concept of superiority is embedded within academia, evaluation, and national pride.

Our sense of time is another way in which our understanding of whiteness became visible. For example, one participant noted, “for some, deadlines are a sense of principle” (MT9, line 184). They went on to explain, the other end of the spectrum goes “All the

way to this very fluid sense of time, as though it's recognized as something we made up" (MT9, lines 187-188). Another group member shared their concern about how we scrutinize students in relation to time and their use of it. "How much they're doing, how fast they are going" (MT9, line 211).

We also took note of the way whiteness promotes ignoring emotion. One participant shared that "the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in a decision-making process" (MT3, lines 286-287) resonated with them personally. Another group member shared, "as a very emotional person I teeter between shame and power with my, you know, is it my greatest weakness or my greatest superpower?" (MT3, lines 302-303). There was recognition that emotions were connected to whiteness, but it was a new idea. The group was willing to look for the way whiteness is manifested, but it was not until later meetings that we discussed our role in dismantling whiteness.

Another aspect of whiteness we discussed was the myth of objectivity. One group member referred to "the belief that there is such a thing as being objective or neutral" (MT3, line 285) but they never explained how that connected to them. A few moments earlier the group member said, "What came to mind was just evaluation and how we appreciate grades in that sort of logical, stringent way" (MT3, 277-278). It was difficult to tell whether they believe grades are objective. Another participant connected the myth of objectivity to the way the institution thinks about workload. They said, "there's an attempt at trying to capture workload as though we need to be certain that everybody's pulling their own weight and that there's a way to quantify workload" (MT9, lines 268-270). In both cases we were linking the myth of objectivity to evaluation processes.

White supremacy culture focuses on one right way, and the group was able to identify examples of that within the society and the institution. For example, one participant said, “It is that like intrinsic belief that where you stand is most right” (MT7, line 370) when they were explaining the trap of viewing things from only one’s own perspective. Another participant shared, “I was thinking about the intersection of our religion and then higher ed. And how both run the risk of placing great value on there being only one right way” (MT3, lines 322-324). Higher education was brought up in subsequent meetings, but the comment about our religion was never revisited. In a later meeting, a group member offered, “The hegemonic norms of white supremacy would just be even like the English language” (MT9, 250-251). They were referring to the assumption that using English, specifically in our institutional practices, is considered the right way.

One participant brought up our sense of space, and how whiteness has affected our perceptions of classroom and office space. They explained, “policies and procedures around classroom space is a limitation in the fluidity” (MT9, lines 190-191). They went on to point out, “we all have our names on the doors. We wouldn’t dream of walking into someone’s office if uninvited, there’s a sense of ownership of space” (MT9, lines 192-193). This perspective was listened to but was not revisited in later discussions.

Our group also discussed the ways in which whiteness is a system enacted through policy. For example, one participant recognized how “the old style is ingrained” (MT7, line 184) and usually is the default perspective. Another participant explained why the current hierarchy in our institution is utilized. “The systems are in place so that there aren’t too many of the people trying to talk to the person way at the top because there’s

only one person at the top” (MT7, lines 219-220). In a later meeting one participant brought up, “There’s this white bureaucratic communication tree I have to follow” (MT9, line 179). Once we began to notice how whiteness functions, another participant stated, “I realize that the structure is very traditional and goes back a long time” (MT9, lines 304-305). Another participant suggested we consider what the structure is like “for our students, that they have to go through an application process to be good, to have a good enough reason to take longer to make their way through school” (MT9, lines 200-202). That same participant summarized, “So those are some policies and structures that I don't think are very inclusive or adaptive” (MT9, lines 221-222). A different observation related to the system on which faculty salaries are based. “Because of the field that they are in, they will always be paid almost double what I have been” (MT9, 290-291). Recognition of whiteness within our department will be discussed in the section related to the fourth research question.

### **Disrupting and dismantling whiteness**

How did the group begin to understand what it meant to disrupt and dismantle whiteness as we developed our racial literacy? The group began to say things like, “How do I resist the ideology of colonialism?” (MT5, lines 321-313). Another participant described the need to “Challenge the dominant paradigm in education” (MT9, line 167). Another participant articulated how the shift happened for them. “The first few meetings felt like a project for Winnie, and then as we got going it felt like a priority” (MN12). One group member explained how they disrupt whiteness by “Not always presenting a single story and the dominant narrative” (MT3, lines 212-213). Another participant described the need to “Listen to whose voices we hear and those that we don't” (MT3,

lines 192-293). One group member wanted to consider how disrupting whiteness could be accomplished if there was not agreement about the need to make changes. “So how do we include those people who are not on board?” (MT7, lines 254-255). Later, another participant offered the idea, “engaging in a conversation with somebody who believes white people are superior and asking them where they’re coming from” (MT7, lines 357-358). As the group articulated what disrupting and dismantling moves looked like, it helped us with our process of developing racial literacy.

### **Entry points**

It was noticeable that we developed our racial literacy depending on the entry points we used. In other words, participants needed a way to connect to the ideas we were exploring together, and the way something was framed made a difference as to whether participants found an on-ramp into the conversation. For example, one group member shared, “I appreciated a different way to zero in on this topic” (MN12). During another group reflection a participant said, “I appreciated the on ramps into talking about race” (MN10). A group member observed, “We talked about ethnocentrism first as an entry point into racism” (MN8). Sometimes a group member had difficulty finding an entry point. For example, during one of our meetings a participant shared, “I don’t know that I’ve made the bridge between where the whiteness factor comes in” (MT9, lines 198-199). They identified how they were trying to find a connection when they explained, “I can see how there are practices that are not inclusive” (MT9, lines 199-200) but they couldn’t bring themselves to label acts as versions of whiteness or racism.

Another example of how entry points affected our discussions is illustrated by this statement, “I’m still trying to think about how this relates to the department” (MT7, line



195). The participant, Lisa, knew we were trying to self-examine our practices within the department but found it easier to apply them to the administration. Lisa could confront whiteness outside the department because she did not feel responsible. Additionally, the accessibility of our conversation seemed to hinge on whether a participant could connect to the terminology we were using. For example, when Lisa was having trouble using the words whiteness and racism, another group member offered, “It’s not really important that we call this work dismantling whiteness or dismantling racism if those things don’t actually have meaning for us” (MT9, lines 322-324). Because Lisa was focused on individual racism, the systemic terms were never used by her.

Every meeting began with an intention which acted as a new entry point. One example of an entry point we used was, “The purpose for this session is for us to challenge our assumptions, illuminate areas of power, uncover hegemony” (MT9, lines 163-164). We started another meeting using this invitation, “Let’s look at the definition and then we can make sure that we’re all on the same page” (MT11, lines 17-18). After watching a video together about how to understand the structure of racism, I prompted, “Let’s see if we can notice and name the institutional structures of whiteness” (MT9, lines 173-174). Having a focus and a goal was useful for those who understood them and were approaching the work from a learner’s stance, not trying to prove one’s knowledge.

Lastly, for some people, the entry points came from work outside the study that they could relate to the study. For example, one participant noted, “That reminds me of the project we started around the theorists” (MT11, line 119). The theorist project was something we had all worked on. Having a previous shared experience was a great entry point for talking about new initiatives. Another group member shared, “An indigenous

scholar would argue that they are the same” (MT7, lines 71-72). Indigenous scholarship was something with which only one participant had background, but for that participant it was an entry point because they had specific background knowledge they could apply. Entry points were an evident necessity to our work together, and paying attention to how we each connected to the work was vital to maintaining a collaborative process.

### **Conceptual understanding**

Developing our racial literacy depended upon our understanding of certain concepts and our ability to utilize new terminology. When discussing the term white supremacy and its connection to racism, one participant noted, “There’s room for such misunderstanding about them” (MT9, line 319). In this case, “them” referred to the terms we were using. In our final meeting, one participant reflected, “I notice that we’ve developed a common language and understanding that is foundational” (MN12). Examples of the terminology we used and examples of what meaning they had for us can be found in Appendix A. What is notable about the interpretations we each had is that they reflect a range of understanding. Although we were using some of the same terms aloud, our conceptual understanding of the terms differed and was closely linked to our racial literacy.

### **Understanding our responsibility**

Part of our process of developing racial literacy was to better understand our responsibility as white people. This point was discussed the most during our third meeting together because of an article excerpt called Dangers of Whiteness (Meister, p.95).

One participant spoke about another organization they are a part of and how they have assumed they need to empower the black staff members. “What we’ve found is that it works so much better if our black staff members are empowered” (MT3, lines 128-129). In response, another participant connected the ideas of the article to a panel discussion they had watched. They shared how they heard the black panelist explaining to the white facilitator, “Liberation is my work to do. Dismantling the whiteness is yours” (MT3, lines 144-145). The same participant went on to summarize our group’s role. “The work to do is to dismantle the whiteness” (MT3, line 146). Another participant responded by paraphrasing the first speaker, “So it is their responsibility to empower or create the space for black voices to do the liberating work?” (MT3, lines 151-152). As we reflected on this meeting together one participant observed, “I notice we talked more about blackness than whiteness” (MN4). Another participant wondered, “Did we avoid the actions we could take to deconstruct whiteness because it’s more difficult to talk about? So, we talk about the other?” (MN4). Being able to take responsibility for the role we play in upholding whiteness first requires an understanding of our racial identity. To the extent we developed racial literacy about ourselves, we were able to start taking responsibility for dismantling whiteness.

### **Recognizing our socialized, constructed racial identities**

To what extent were we able to recognize how our racial identities are socially constructed? Or maybe the question is: To what extent did we talk about it with one another? Developing racial literacy includes the understanding that race is a social construct, but in order to develop racial literacy, one’s perspective must include awareness of and honesty about one’s own racial identity. In our case, we had moments

of awareness and disclosure. For example, one participant shared how they were socialized. “That’s a construct that I was brought up in. Being able to just associate emotion with weakness” (MT3, lines 290-291). During a reflection session, one participant observed, “We have shared whiteness; we assume a shared context” (MN4). They were questioning that although everyone in the group was white, could we assume the same background? Another participant observed that because of this study, “I am learning to talk about myself and my experience racially which I’ve never had to do” (MN4). During a meeting in which we discussed our racial autobiographies, one participant reflected, “It was really clear to me the school system had a lot of propaganda” (MT5, lines 295-296) focused on white supremacy. Talking about our racial upbringing, specifically the way we were socialized as white people to be white, was hinted at or implied more than overtly discussed. This phenomenon will be further discussed in chapter six.

### **Pain points**

During our efforts to develop racial literacy, we began looking at the various elements of whiteness and asked ourselves where we had seen the negative impact of whiteness within our classroom and institution. For one participant in particular, identifying pain points or problematic experiences became a theme. For example, the participant shared their experience with a superior who was rarely available for meetings. “I felt very diminished in my sense of how I was valued as a voice or as an employee” (MT7, lines 204-205). When the topic of workload among faculty came up, the same participant shared, “That reminds me of some things that I’ve been frustrated about which tend to come out in these conversations” (MT9, lines 280-281). They were referring to

how the things they devote their time to are undervalued. When the group was talking about validity and the variety approaches to learning and ways of knowing, the same participant responded, “It frustrates me to no end to try to explain that to people over and over and over again and to constantly feel like I’m justifying my practice and legitimizing it” (MT7, lines 134-136). This participant was easily able to see how they had been marginalized and harmed by narrow thinking. At one point when the frustrated group member was sharing a pain point, another participant responded, “I wonder if that’s an example of how white supremacy damages white people as well” (MT3, lines 375-376).

This topic shows that one of our group members was able to articulate several examples of when they have been frustrated by the system. What this topic does not show is the participant sharing ownership or awareness of the ways they are complicit within the system that creates these pain points. This will be further discussed in chapter six.

In summary, developing racial literacy involved building our capacity to discuss racial topics, recognizing how whiteness is upheld, uncovering blind spots, identifying whiteness within our practices, identifying examples of how to disrupt and dismantle whiteness, finding or creating entry points, developing new conceptual language, understanding our responsibility within the system, recognizing how we have been socialized racially, and looking at our pain points. The same participants who were able to examine their racial identity honestly and openly were better able to develop racial literacy.

### **Researcher’s Observation**

I wish I could have channeled Dr. Davis through my participation in this study, because he would have openly and unapologetically challenged each of the above

statements and behaviors that upheld whiteness. I did not. I was aware of holding back, and it's through my inaction that I uphold whiteness even though my desire is to confront it. Dr. Davis asked questions like how we do violence in the classroom. He continually turned it back to our actions and power. Am I really confronting my whiteness by holding back?

I admire Cathy's capacity for and enactment of saying something when a blind spot needed calling out. I notice it was mostly to point out a misconception of power. As I share my analysis of this study, I'm aware that the blind spots I am willing to bring up now are ones I could have challenged during dialogue, and I didn't. I told myself as researcher I needed to observe and let other participants step up, but that was an excuse to avoid the unease. I'm aware that my discomfort was harmful because it allowed the group to perpetuate the kind of thinking this study was meant to confront.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – FINDINGS of Research Question Two & Four**

In this chapter, the findings will be presented in reference to the remaining two of the four research questions. The findings related to the second research question describe how participants developed critical self-reflection throughout the study. The findings related to the fourth research question exhibit how participants' curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices were affected by the study.

Research questions 2 and 4 have been grouped together in this chapter because of the relationship between critical self-reflection and making choices. In other words, to the extent a person develops the capacity to notice and examine their assumptions, that person was better able to conceive of choices that were acts of confronting and dismantling whiteness.

The findings will be referenced with the following abbreviations. Quotes from meeting transcripts are labeled (MT). Excerpts from meeting notes are labeled (MN). Evidence from participant reflections is labeled (PR). For example, a quote from line 37 of meeting transcript three would be labeled (MT3, line 37). Gender neutral language like "they" and "them" will be used to mask the gender of the participants since there was one male in the group. Pseudonyms have been added instead of participant's real names.

### **Research Question Two - Critical Self-Reflection**

The second research question (How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversations inquiry group develop critical self-reflection?) was designed to investigate how participants developed critical self-reflection skills, or the capacity to examine one's assumptions and question what is considered reliable knowledge. The findings related to this research question are organized in two parts: (1) categories developed from meeting

transcripts and meeting notes, and (2) results from participant reflections. The categories developed from transcripts and notes are (a) Conditions that foster critical self-reflection, (b) Conditions that inhibit critical self-reflection, (c) Examples of a non-critical self-reflection, (d) Examples of critical self-reflection, (e) Where critical self-reflection can lead us. Results from participant reflections will be introduced after the findings from meeting transcripts and notes in part two.

### **Part One – Categories from Meeting Transcripts and Notes**

#### **Conditions that foster critical self-reflection**

Being able to notice and assess one's assumptions can be supported through certain conditions. For example, using terminology specific to the task can help participants become aware of their own knowledge base and use of language. During our first meeting, we explored the concept of white fragility as a way to practice being vulnerable. For example, "I don't even know if that's an ok term to use" (MT1, line 140) shows that the participant is aware that terminology matters, but admits they are unsure about their own use of the term "people of color." Later, one participant commented on being open to making mistakes. "We're not going to get it right. We're not going to get it right potentially for a long time" (MT1, line 217). They go on to imagine, "we're going to say things that are fraught with racial biases and are going to be wrong terminology and who knows what else" (MT1, lines 218-219). This kind of acceptance is referred to as a learner stance. This concept of taking the stance of a learner was introduced at the beginning of the third meeting as "that important positioning of I don't know. I don't know this yet. And even when I think I know, I don't really know" (MT3, lines 10-12). Later in the meeting participants were asked, "How do you know what to dismantle if



you don't know what to dismantle?" (MT3, line 226). This question was offered before introducing a document outlining aspects of white supremacy culture, another set of new terminology. When we analyzed that meeting, a participant noted, "I see willingness from everyone to participate in the conversation and put difficult ideas into language" (MN4). In one of our later meetings, a group member commented that they were "still trying to define words like racism, supremacy, etc. Still trying to understand what they mean and where they come from" (MN10).

Another condition that supports critical self-reflection is asking participants to consider how their assumptions operate within different contexts. For example, the concept of dismantling whiteness was introduced, and participants were asked to consider how the concept could be applied "within our teaching practice, within our department, within our program, within the institution or at large" (MT3, lines 3-4). Two weeks later, we examined our racial autobiographies by asking ourselves what assumptions or beliefs we could see functioning in our narratives. One participant asked if we were looking for beliefs we had not noticed before. I clarified, "they can be unconscious or not. Any belief will do" (MT5, line 75). Part of critical self-reflection is recognizing that even the beliefs we hold consciously require examination.

Throughout the remainder of the study, participants identified conditions that supported their critical self-reflection. For example, as one participant stated, I "confront my own position through continual learning or awareness" (MT5, line 115). And they added another time, "just allowing space for dialogue and being approachable" (MT7, lines 326-327). One participant noted that follow-up questions were helpful (MN10). Another participant noted that one of the ways we can identify racism in our program is

through reflective practice or examining how do we know (MN12). It is notable that the participants who identified how they critically self-reflect were the two most knowledgeable and experienced group members previous to this study.

One participant made the observation that the practice of critical self-reflection connected well to an experiential model (MT11, line 401). In other words, engaging in critical dialogue as a shared experience followed by critical reflection that considers application and future implications. We found that the conditions that foster critical self-reflection are: becoming aware of one's knowledge base, being open to vulnerability, looking at how our assumptions operate in different contexts, continual learning, dialogue, and approaching the process experientially. The experiential model mentioned by one of the participants also helps explain why developing critical self-reflection links to envisioning action items (Kolb, 1984).

### **Conditions that inhibit critical self-reflection**

Some of the observations we made during our collaborative reflections, when we looked at our meeting transcripts, were related to what might have hindered our ability to be critically self-reflective. The group valued the dialogical approach we utilized, and when I introduced organizational tools, they noticed it may have hindered our work. For example, when analyzing our process, participants wondered if using an organizational chart was the most conducive tool for engaging in a critical conversation. One participant asked, "Was the further definition useful or necessary?" (MN6). Another asked, "where would the conversation have gone if we hadn't used the table?" (MN6).

There were other conditions that inhibited our critical self-reflection which were discussed in the section on developing racial literacy in the previous chapter, but these

conditions were not identified by the group. The additional conditions were identified through the researcher's process of data analysis.

### **Examples of a non-critical self-reflection**

When discussing various topics from a critical standpoint, there were moments that participants responded or participated in ways that were not self-reflective. For example, one of these responses was to defend a position when the purpose of the discussion was to consider the beliefs behind programmatic choices. "For me, I think it's different and meets a different need and I like that" (MT7, line 123). Another example of not being self-reflective was when a participant shared how they have come to think of their role as teacher as though it was settled and final whereas it was still an assumption. "Something that I've thought about a lot and come to terms with is just being really clear and comfortable being like a curator of voices" (MT3, lines 203-204). Likewise, in another meeting a participant stated, "I guess I was just drawn to that piece first and foremost" (MT11, line 80), without any mention or consideration of why that might be. Another unquestioned assumption was voiced in the statement, "when the students come to your class, they want to be able to hear you and your ideas as the lecturer" (MT3, lines 207-208). The group also did not push back on an assumption regarding the quality of public education. "In my entire life of private school education, I had never had a day of public school in my life, and I'm still facing that" (MT3, lines 269-370). Non-critical self-reflection occurs when an assumption goes unnoticed and unexamined. The question is, what is the role of the group in this regard?

One additional example of discourse that avoids critical self-reflection is the use of "interesting" as a qualifier. On several occasions, more than a dozen times throughout

the study, participants qualified their response to a topic by using the word “interesting” which avoided consideration of what they were feeling or assuming. For example, “That was just like, something interesting” (MT1, line 260) was phrase used to wrap up their thought after sharing several observations that they were clearly having an emotional response to. In a later meeting the same group member was talking about their relationship with cultural norms regarding emotion and said, “It’s just interesting to think back on why” (MT3, line 297). So although the topic was emotion it was being discussed dispassionately. In an other meeting when a participant was sharing how they were shut down by an administrative decision they qualified it as, “which is interesting” (MT7, line 54) even though it clearly bothered the speaker. In one of our final meetings when discussing an area of need, a participant talked through how they wished they could change something for the students’ sake but for their own sake it wouldn’t work. They ended by saying, “So that’s interesting” (MT11, line 212). Using the word “interesting” as a qualifier assumes a neutral position and circumvents critical self-reflection without interrogating what is really meant by the speaker.

### **Examples of critical self-reflection**

In our group, we achieved critical self-reflection when we considered the impact, employed metacognition, and asked questions. For example, we were talking about the need to further examine our choice of theorists and “what message we might be conveying as a department” (MT11, lines 122) through that choice. In other words, what impact our content offerings would have on our students. Another example of our consideration of impact was when we discussed the difference between what our intent is without having considered whether we are achieving it. “We say we are going to bring

multiple perspectives” (MT7, lines 293-294). The speaker was questioning whether we have checked if we are doing what we say. Earlier in that same meeting, we also discussed the need to recognize that our language has an impact, and we are responsible for assessing it. “What are we communicating? And is that what we really mean?” (MT7, line 92). Making a shift from discussing intent to considering our impact was a critically self-reflective move.

We also had moments of critical self-reflection that came from being metacognitive. Noticing one’s thought-process and sharing it aloud is part of developing critical self-reflection because it requires self-awareness and vulnerability. We had several examples of metacognitive statements like, “I’m just throwing up that dissonance piece for me” (MT1, lines 134-135). They went on to explain, “I didn’t know how to agree or disagree with that definition” (MT1, lines 135-136). This allowed the group to help that participant further investigate and uncover a misunderstanding. Other metacognitive comments modeled for all of us how participants were achieving critical self-reflection. “I just started reflecting and processing on that. So, thank you for clarifying” (MT1, line 175). This participant made great use of processing new ideas through reflection throughout the study. This allowed the group to see the impact they were having on them. Another metacognitive comment was, “I’m listening to the course and thinking, gosh, that’s amazing. Am I doing that in my own practice?” (MT11, lines 214-215). This comment made space for others to more openly consider altering their practices. Additionally, “I was pausing and kind of going back to something I had originally brought up” (MT11, lines 300-301). This idea of pausing needed to be lifted up through a metacognitive statement because it would have gone unnoticed otherwise.

Lastly, during a discussion of one of the transcripts a participant said, “I noticed in their commentary the vulnerable willingness to explain their process to us” (MN10). This recognition lifted up the benefit of metacognitive dialogue. It created space for vulnerability which is necessary to critical self-reflection. Because this study is what allowed me to see the benefit of metacognitive statements as a way to develop critical self-reflection, it was not intentionally built into the study. This idea will be offered for further research in the final chapter.

The greatest evidence of how our group developed our critical self-reflection is found in the questions we asked. Although I functioned as a facilitator, the questions came from all participants, not just me. One participant asked rhetorically, “Are you looking at the students as vessels half-full that you’re trying to fill up or are they already there and then just co-constructing with you?” (MT3, lines 201-203). Another participant asked reflectively, “Are there other ways to bring in the voices that don’t otherwise get represented?” (MT3, 162-163). Another group member wondered, “At what point does it make sense to confront the system?” (MT3, line 347). The speaker went on to ask, “At what point does it make sense for us to use our privilege to raise the question, to point something out? How long do we wait?” (MT3, lines 347-348). In the analysis of the third meeting, a participant reflected, “I noticed I used the second and third person rather than the first person. Am I distancing myself from owning my positions?” (MN4). Another participant asked, “Are we being critical?” (MN4). All of these examples illustrate how the group used questions to develop critical self-reflection by examining their assumptions aloud.

In our seventh meeting, our critical questions continued to help us uncover additional assumptions. As we unpacked an article together, one participant asked, “So I need to bestow validity and accuracy on you?” (MT7, line 366) to illuminate the way educators might position themselves as bestowers. Earlier in the meeting a participant asked the group to examine an assumption, “have we constructed the two tracks and developed them and supported them and thought about them through a narrow lens?” (MT7, lines 97-98). Another participant suggested questioning the mentality of our two-track approach. “Whether we see that as a downgrade or as meeting the needs of a variety of types of learners is a question that I think is worth asking” (MT7, lines 116-117). In our eighth meeting, we reflected on our seventh meeting which yielded a question about viewing choices as a dichotomy. “Do two tracks create a binary?” (MN8).

During our ninth meeting, we asked ourselves questions like, “What else is deeply embedded that we need to take a closer look at?” (MT9, lines 309-310). “Are we in a situation where we are only counting the things that are easy to count and easy to quantify?” (MT9, lines 274-275). “Does that stem back to this type of white supremacy culture?” (MT9, line 339). “Where does that type of thinking come from?” (MT9, line 338). These questions illustrate an open-mindedness, a willingness to admit uncertainty, and the humility to examine the foundations of white supremacy enacted in our choices.

In our eleventh meeting a participant asked, “What are our blind spots?” (MT11, line 362). Getting to a point where the group could ask itself about its blind spots is an example of a critically self-reflective question because it starts from the premise that we operate on assumptions that are not fully informed. Overall, the questions asked throughout the study provide evidence of how our group developed critical self-

reflection. Our group developed the capacity to set aside attachments to tradition and truly examine the underlying assumptions behind its decisions. Our questions helped foster a collaborative approach based on curiosity and the bravery it takes to rethink choices built on whiteness. Because we were able to develop critical self-reflection, we began to see where that led us.

### **Where critical self-reflection led us**

As a group, because of our progress to be more critically self-reflective we began to have realizations or insights, were able to envision how to take action, gained greater clarity, and built momentum for our work together. Some of our realizations and insights sounded like this. One participant said, “I think I stand corrected” (MT1, line 100) as they considered a new definition of racism. Another participant reflected, “I’m realizing I may have been kind of roadblocked and derailed by my own thoughts about her definition that I didn’t hear her say this is the narrow definition” (MT1, lines 173-174). A couple meetings later the realizations sounded like this. “If we are spending our time thinking about how to empower black people, then it’s near impossible to do without it seeming like we’re the savior” (MT3, lines 182-184). The speaker went on to realize, “I feel like what the author’s asking us to do is shift to dismantling whiteness” (MT3 184-185). As the study progressed, we continued to have new insights marked by comments such as this. “I’ve seen the light or I’m seeing the light, Woe” (MT9, lines 313-314). A final reflective comment during our last meeting was, “I notice how my thinking has evolved” (MN12).

As a group our critical self-reflection led us to discuss how we might apply this new skill together. For example, one participant offered, “Sometimes that looks like



talking to another white person to alert them to the fact that they're not listening" (MT3, lines 185-186). In other words, since we've become more aware of whiteness and how it functions, we can take action and speak up. Another application we discussed was to use our critical self-reflection to question our curricular choices by "thinking though our two concentrations and how we've titled them and what's included in them" (MT7, lines 276-277). And later we brought up our pedagogical choices. "We can give that some thought and look at our pedagogy and what's effective and what's not" (MT11, line 154). Further investigation into how this study affected curricular and pedagogical choices will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. One additional hope communicated by participants about how critical self-reflection could be applied came up in our second to last meeting. "I would love for us to be able to rely on one another to really examine carefully our blind spots" (MT11, lines 180-181).

We also gained greater clarity about our role and responsibility in dismantling whiteness through critical self-reflection. One participant stated the need to "unlearn things that I've learned" (MT1, line 107). Another participant clarified that our work is not about liberating, but "The work to do is dismantling whiteness" (MT3, line 146). One participant understood their role in this way. "We have to seek multiple perspectives and to check our own biases" (MT7, lines 316-317). All of these clarifying statements are a result of critical self-reflection, or the capacity to examine one's assumptions.

Participants also commented on their motivation to continue this work. It seemed like there was a momentum that built throughout the study that culminated in comments like these. "This is progress" (MN12). "It's fun to come from a position of being learners – so open-minded" (MN10). "Now I'm all excited" (MT11, 326). "I wanted to revisit the

ideas and I wanted to keep reading” (MN12). Although the practice of putting one’s beliefs and assumptions under a microscope could produce discomfort and defensiveness, our group found the process to be enlightening, clarifying, and transformative to the point of wanting to take further action.

In summary, the findings from part one of research question two show how the group developed critical self-reflection. Through the critical conversation inquiry group, we developed new terminology, worked to be more open-minded and vulnerable, examined our assumptions and beliefs, and identified the benefit of approaching our dialogue experientially. We also had moments of being defensive, inflexible, passive, and unspecific with our language. Our most critically self-reflective moves came when we considered impact, employed metacognition, and asked questions which led to being ready to make new choices. The following is part two of the findings for the second research question in this study.

### **Part Two – Results from Participant Reflections**

In order to better understand how participants developed critical self-reflection through a critical conversation inquiry group, participants were asked to answer the following questions in writing at the end of each meeting on odd-numbered weeks.

1. What new perspectives did you gain today?
2. What are you noticing about your own opinions? Are they informed knowledge?
3. How are you shifting from a personal perspective to looking at a broader societal perspective? Did you notice any defensive feelings? Why?
4. How do your own social positions (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status) inform your perspective?

The findings from participant reflections will be grouped by question.

**Question 1- What new perspectives did you gain today?**

When grouped together, participants’ answers to this question yielded a list of concepts similar to the categories identified through analytical coding of meeting transcripts and notes. This is not surprising because of the way the study was designed. The study was set up to enact a cycle of discuss, reflect, analyze. Through this cycle, the participants would produce a transcript during the discussion phase and meeting notes during the analysis phase. The participant reflections show an awareness of what was being accomplished during discussions, and these reflections influenced what was shared during analysis. For example, participants brought up intersectionality, binary thinking, privilege, dismantling whiteness versus liberating the oppressed, looking at our ideology, entry points, etc. The findings from the reflections support the findings from the transcripts and meeting notes.

**Question 2- What are you noticing about your own opinions? Are they informed**

**knowledge?** Being critically self-reflective requires an awareness of where one’s knowledge comes from and a willingness to investigate the foundations of one’s assumptions. This question was designed to get at this aspect of critical self-reflection. The participants’ answers and the number of instances can be sorted into a grid on four dimensions.

<p><b>Uninformed and Unaware</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>1</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">(3 instances)</p>	<p><b>Uninformed and Aware</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>3</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">(13 instances)</p>
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<b>Informed and Unaware</b>	<b>Informed and Aware</b>
<p data-bbox="477 268 493 296">2</p> <p data-bbox="402 342 568 373">(4 instances)</p>	<p data-bbox="850 268 867 296">4</p> <p data-bbox="769 342 948 373">(20 instances)</p>

An example of a response that meets the criteria of quadrant one would be. “I think my own opinions are mildly influenced by fact and more influenced by ingrained perspectives, light research, media, and unconscious bias” (PR1, d). This participant groups together multiple sources and does not seem to be aware of whether those could be considered informed.

“I am noticing that my opinions are framed by a larger context of hegemony and dominant narrative but need to be mindfully and intentionally focused on racism and anti-racism” (PR2, f). This is an example of a participant who thinks they are aware of their misgivings but does not realize that although they are well-versed in the concepts of hegemony and dominant narrative, the goal is to be mindful of dismantling whiteness. This is an example of a comment that meets the criteria for quadrant two.

This participant’s comment is an example of quadrant three. “I realized I was talking off the top of my head without really having studied the concept of empowering marginalized voices” (PR2, b). The speaker is aware of their lack of informed knowledge.

For example, “My opinions are informed from my studies which provide me the framework and language to engage in the discussions” (PR1, c). This comment is an example of quadrant four. They are sharing informed opinions and aware they are doing so.

The findings show that participants' level of awareness and informed opinion were a range across the topics discussed and evidence of how participants developed their critical self-reflection skills. When sorted by quadrant, the distribution of participant responses was notable. This distribution is consistent with the way the study was structured, to offer participants new information they could use to build their informed knowledge and develop awareness.

**Question 3 - How are you shifting from a personal perspective to looking at a broader societal perspective?**

Being able to consider a broader social perspective is necessary to dismantling whiteness because whiteness functions as a system (Harris, 1993). Participant responses to this question could be sorted into three groupings:

1. What helps someone shift their perspective?
2. What happens when someone shifts their perspective?
3. What obstructs or impedes someone from shifting their perspective?

**What helps someone shift their perspective**

Respondents noticed that they were able to shift from a personal to a societal perspective because of several reasons:

- Because of the way the conversation was framed (PR4, f and PR5, f)
- By asking how does the dominant culture function (PR5, d)
- By being open to new perspectives (PR5, e and PR, d)
- By looking at historical norms, traditions, and policies (PR5, c)
- By comparing classroom practices to societal norms (PR4, b)
- By citing examples of systems based on white supremacy (PR2, b)

- By recognizing how the personal is based on societal norms (PR3, b and PR1, c)
- By considering the community (PR4, c)

This list can be considered in terms of the conditions that support a shift in thinking to a more societal perspective.

### **What happens when someone shifts their perspective**

The second category that respondents' comments were sorted into was what happens when someone shifts their perspective. Responses ranged from realizations, greater awareness, clarity and connections. For example, one participant said they were realizing a need for action (PR1, e). Another participant acknowledged that it requires work to consider the broader societal perspective (PR1, f). One participant was able to define for themselves the difference between personal and societal. They shared that societal was for the good of the whole and required stepping away from personal wants (PR2, e). One participant began thinking about their responsibility and explained they need to examine their role within the system in order to keep from distancing oneself from the societal perspective (PR2, f). Another participant said they were aware that they still needed to examine their own racial history and use a societal perspective to examine their personal perspective (PR2, c). Comments near the end of the study began to sound like an understanding of why we worked to shift our perspective. For example, one participant said they were reflecting on how our actions within our department have a ripple effect into society (PR6, f).

### **What obstructs or impedes someone from shifting their perspective**

The smallest category was comprised of statements that illustrated what got in the way of shifting from a personal to a societal perspective. For example, one participant

said that we have no control over the societal perspective (PR1, b). A similar sentiment was shared a week later by another participant when they said the larger the scope, the more overwhelming (PR3, d). Besides admitting the excuses we might use to avoid the societal perspective, there were also misunderstandings. For example, one participant defined taking a personal perspective as white and taking a societal perspective as othering (PR3, c). Another misunderstanding that was voiced was that they were using their personal experiences to understand the other and that was a shift in perspective (PR4, d). Another obstacle that occurred was positioning oneself as the person with a perspective that others needed. They asked why others don't see what we see (PR5, d). However, in this context the speaker was referring to why society does not see their personal perspective which is a reversal of the intent behind the question.

#### **Question 4 - Did you notice any defensive feelings? Why?**

Participants answered this question every week as a way to develop critical self-reflection. Being aware of one's feelings, especially defensiveness, and being able to talk about them openly is vital to developing the disposition and skills necessary to dismantling whiteness (Menakem, 2017, Okun, n.d.). Overall, our group responded with a "yes" 50 percent of the time and "no" 50 percent of the time. The reasons given varied and will be shared next.

Participant responses that answered that they did not experience defensive feelings during that day's session said they were open-minded, using a growth mindset, curious, and inspired. Notice that none of these explanations involve emotions. They seem to be about a cognitive stance that they attribute to not feeling defensive. Participant responses that acknowledged defensive feelings covered a variety of reasons. For

example, someone felt defensive about another participant's word choice (PR1, b) when they felt a fellow participant was not owning their own feelings. Another participant felt defensive when asked to consider white privilege because they wanted recognition for women in the oppressive narrative (PR2, f). Another participant felt defensive when a fellow participant was trying to put themselves in the shoes of a person of color (PR2, b). The participant said it did not feel right to assume we could truly imagine. Another participant commented on the way an American-centric perspective is regularly assumed in conversation (PR2, c) and this bothered them. One participant shared their discomfort around discussing systems that make sense to them and benefit them (PR5, f). Another participant noticed they were bothered by the fact that other participants were unwilling to use the term whiteness and preferred to discuss inclusive practices (PR, b).

Without this question in the participant reflection protocol, these ideas would not have been shared. In other words, discussion of defensive feelings was not embedded in any other part of the study's design.

**Question 5 - How do your own social positions (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status) inform your perspective?**

Becoming aware of the intersectionality of social positions and aspects of one's identity in regard to privilege and power was an important component of critical self-reflection for our group. Only to the extent we became aware of our own social positions could we take responsibility for our part in dismantling the system that oppresses or privileges based on social position. Participant responses to this question can be examined on a spectrum (1) lack of awareness, (2) being able to name their social



position (3) identifying how that social position affects them and others (4) ways we can address our social position.



At one end of the spectrum there were a couple comments that illustrated a lack of awareness. One participant said this was an important question and they would like to explore this question further (PR1, e). This response sounded like they were not sure what the question was asking. The other response at this end of the spectrum acknowledged their lack of awareness by saying they did not usually think about their sexual orientation or able-bodiedness (PR6, b).

A little further along the spectrum, there were several responses that named the social position with which the participant identified. The majority spoke of race, gender, and class. There was recognition that they fit within the dominant group in a majority of social positions.

Beyond awareness of social position, participants also discussed how their social position affects them and others. For example, one participant explained how they notice they use their gender to try to understand oppressive practices (PR1, b). A different participant mentioned gender as a help and a distractor (PR2, f). Another participant explained that their social position has taught them to separate from emotion (PR1, c). A few comments centered on the idea that as a person from mostly the dominant group they do not fear harm or discomfort (PR6, f; PR5, f; PR4, f). All of these comments came from one participant over the course of three meeting reflections. Several times there was mention of how a participant's social position affects their blind spots. In other words,

depending on one's social position it might be easier to see white supremacy (PR2, b; PR4, b; PR5, b & c; PR6, b). One last observation that qualifies as an awareness of how social position affects us and others explains that privilege takes credit without responsibility (PR3, b).

Lastly, at the other end of the spectrum we have a few reflections that discuss how we might address our social positions. One participant explained that one perspective is missing the entire truth (PR5, e) which means we need multiple perspectives to get at the truth. Another participant suggested we ask who should be centered, who should be included, and who should lead as we approach any collective work (PR6, c). The same participant shared after an earlier meeting that they were leaning into identifying as white and feeling empowered to deconstruct whiteness (PR3, c). Another participant said they could be more aware of false information (PR5, e). And another participant said they consider fairness, equality, freedom, and success (PR5, d) when looking at impact across social positions. One participant suggested their research into indigenous scholarship helps to understand the effects of various social positions (PR4, c).

In summary, participant reflections showed how we each varied in our capacity to build new knowledge, develop greater awareness of whether our opinions were backed by informed knowledge, practice shifting our perspective from a personal to a societal perspective, work on being aware of our feelings, especially defensive ones, and become more aware of our social positions and how that informs our perspective. Overall, as a group, this study helped us develop critical self-reflection to the point we could envision new choices, which is what research question four relates to. The following section will address the fourth research question in this study.

**Researcher's Observation**

Toggling back and forth between being a facilitator, participant, and researcher was a challenge. As soon as I felt uncomfortable in one role, I could switch to another. When the above assumptions were voiced, I was aware that they were unexamined assumptions, and I chose not to say anything. I was worried about dominating the dialogue, but now I wonder if that was an excuse to avoid what I thought would be an uncomfortable or risky move. Going into this study I thought that the goal was to acknowledge and move past the discomfort. In other words, I thought being successful meant getting to a place where I didn't feel uncomfortable anymore. But I'm realizing that being able to feel the discomfort and connect to all my feelings is an important part of this healing work. It is not about developing the capacity to push through uncomfortable feelings. It is about rehumanizing dialogue, relationships, and choices.

**Research Question Four – Curricular, Pedagogical, and Policy Choices**

The fourth research question (How does participation in a critical conversations inquiry group affect curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices made by Educational Studies faculty?) was designed to answer how our work in this study affected our thinking and future planning regarding curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices. In other words what ideas or actions did the group identify that would dismantle whiteness in praxis? Although a tentative list of action items was produced, our process of examining our choices is of equal import. The following categories were identified through analytical coding of our conversations related to making choices: assessment practices, considering process, looking at resources, looking at content, considering student needs and goals, classroom practices, how we think about our profession, recent

work together, how we frame our work, action items, and potential obstacles. The findings from each category will be shared in the following paragraphs.

### **Assessment practices**

As the study progressed and the group began talking about the program and their role as educators, we discussed assessing student learning. One participant explained their reluctance to question the status quo regarding assessment. They shared, “I have worried about whether I could even argue for a different version of what we’re allowed to utilize as evidence of student thinking” (MT7, Lines 148-150). In a later meeting, one participant explained how they approach a theory class that may seem unusual to the status quo. “The main point is not that they walk away being like totally experts on each of the 20 plus leadership theories” (MT11, lines 185-186). The speaker explained their approach was to develop critical thinking through the use of the 20 plus theories as tools for analysis. The implications of this topic of assessment will be further discussed in chapter six.

### **Considering process**

The second to last meeting was when we dove into discussing next steps. The study did not assume that the group would elect to continue the work moving forward, but based on participant responses, there was a genuine desire to take what we had learned during the study and apply it. The following findings are an indication of how the group was thinking about process for next steps. For example, one participant suggested “Finding common language and understanding around what it is we think we’re all collectively achieving with our students” (MT11, lines 292-293). Another group member suggested “using some of Suzie’s deconstruction and reconstruction tools in our practice

as perhaps a semester or year-long project” (MT11, lines 363-364). One participant wanted us to consider, “I wonder if this goes back to looking at our programming. What we teach and when we teach it” (MT11, lines 236-237). One group member was thinking about “The wording of class titles or the description or even perhaps the wording of the outcomes” (MT11, lines 341-342). Another participant offered the idea, “If we looked at our department outcomes and we talked about the ways in which those could be accomplished through a social justice lens” (MT11, lines 288-290). When considering how we might prioritize our ideas, one group member said, “So maybe the budget in a department meeting but the critical pedagogy would be launched through a retreat in January?” (MT11, lines 375-377). Another participant added, “And maybe the degree audit just seems like a natural progression” (MT11, line 405). One thing our process did not include was who might take responsibility for helping the group act on the brainstormed ideas. Considering a process for continuing the work was an integral part of discussing our choices and will be further discussed in chapter six.

### **Looking at resources**

Part of how the group chose to think about its choices was in the allocation of resources. For example, one group member suggested we pay attention to how we spend. “I’m sure we could think of other ways that the department money budget might be able to be used to reduce marginalization. To be able to give more students more experiences” (MT11, lines 85-78). Later, the same participant reiterated, “Sit down with our annual budget. What is it? What does it typically go to? What are the funds we have leftover?” (MT11, lines 370-371). Although there was only one participant who brought up the budget, the rest of the group agreed to make space for that conversation in the future.

**Looking at content**

Another aspect of curricular and pedagogical choices our group explored because of the critical conversation inquiry group was the content we teach. We identified content as texts, knowledge, and skills. For example, one participant clarified what they count as texts. “Specifically, any course materials that we list on our syllabi, ones that we have the students purchase or ones that we’re able to provide the students” (MT11, lines 112-113). One participant shared what they teach in one of their courses, “we’re talking about ideology and hegemony, stocks of knowledge and personal identity” (MT11, lines 187-188). In response to what that participant shared, another participant questioned, “Why wouldn’t we want our ed majors to have that skill set as early as possible in the major?” (MT11, lines 242-243). Another question that came up was regarding, “This issue of having material that is fraught with mixed messages” (MT11, lines 165-166). The group agreed that content provided by certain course materials becomes problematic when it is laced with stereotypes or biases. There was recognition that the topics being taught can be influenced by how they are taught, when they are taught, and the resources being used. The group discussed re-examining the authors we are choosing for our students to read.

**Considering student needs and goals**

As the group thought about curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices, the needs and goals of students became part of our discussion. For example, one group member speculated, “I think that there’s probably 100 other ways that we could include student voices more in different ways” (MT7, lines 330-331). This was a recognition of potential; however, the group did not identify what those other ways of including student voices looked like. Another participant asked, “What is it that international students, and I would

imagine it's different by country, think that they might get out of the major that wouldn't line up with what their needs are?" (MT11, lines 312-313). This line of questioning was a shift from expecting students to appreciate what our department has to offer and considering how we might better understand the students' needs when envisioning our program. Another group member affirmed our shifted thinking when they said, "I like the idea of centering the student voice in it" (MT11, lines 105-106). Considering student needs and goals was a theme that developed later in the study and was a shift from earlier discussions about how the institution could better serve the faculty.

### **Classroom practices**

Considering how we teach our students fits within the context of curricular and pedagogical choices, but the group did not spend much time envisioning together. Certain practices were mentioned because participants could see how those practices might be problematic or useful. For example, one participant shared, "I struggle to know how to get that back. When they've completely misrepresented a theorist or concepts" (MT11, lines 152-153). This was in reference to students peer-teaching and the ways it can go awry. Other participants agreed they had experienced this problem as well. Another participant shared an approach they use in one of their courses. "We identify all of the gaps and holes through things like flow of power and willful blindness and things like that" (MT11, lines 193-194). The speaker was referencing how they help students read the course material more critically. One group member pointed out a shared appreciation for building relationships with our students. "I feel like we're all on a similar page of understanding that we know relationships and maintaining relationships takes that" (MT11, lines 73-74). The group agreed that the practice of building and maintaining

relationships was good classroom practice, and this will be further discussed in chapter six.

### **How we think about our profession**

One of the categories that became visible during our final discussion was how we think about our profession. In other words, as part of our action-item brainstorming, we problematized the way we think and talk about the teaching profession and the ramifications of that on our programmatic choices. For example, one participant shared, “I recognize that the allure of a teaching profession has really hit a dip” (MT11, line 316). This was recognition of the obstacles, and it was also a comment based on an American perspective. They went on to say, “There’s so much bad press out there about what it takes to be a teacher and what the conditions are” (MT11, lines 316-317). In response, another participant shared, “I’m also wondering about defining our profession” (MT11, lines 327-328). This group member was suggesting we rethink how we characterize teaching as a profession. They added, “If teachers are marginalized, excluded minorities as a profession, how can we interrupt that dominant narrative?” (MT11, lines 328-329). Another participant built on that idea and asked, “Why would we not be the ones who start to attach images to teaching that are more respected and more appealing?” (MT11, lines 335-336). This topic requires more discussion and will be addressed in chapter six.

### **Recent work together**

As a department, this group had begun a few initiatives before this study that connected well to a conversation about curricular and pedagogical choices. Our recent work together came up in a couple of our meetings. For example, one participant remembered our efforts to catalog which theories and theorists were being taught in our



program. “We all put down like the different theorists and theories that we were covering our different courses like that helped me understand which different like perspectives and lenses I was bringing to certain courses” (MT7, lines 305-307). Regarding that same list, another participant mentioned in another meeting, “We started collecting it, but we didn’t analyze it” (MT11, lines 119-120). Another work product we compiled before this study was a departmental mission statement. One participant recalled, “We co-constructed our mission for the department” (MT7, line 287). Another participant referred to the mission statement and how it might connect to this study. “I think about also just other aspects of our mission. Being able to cultivate that sense of inclusivity and community” (MT11, lines 71-73). There was an acknowledgment of the work we had accomplished before this study began and an interest in revisiting that work using our new understanding from this study. This is significant to note because there was already a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration among the participants before the study began.

### **How we frame our work**

The way I framed or directed the work led us to consider our pedagogical, curricular, and policy choices as they related to whiteness. For example, in one of our meetings we were specifically looking at our pedagogical and curricular choices, and I stated, “specifically, with an eye to dismantling whiteness” (MT7, lines 10-11). I added the question, “What are we noticing about our curricular and pedagogical practices within our department that we could critically examine and possibly rethink?” (MT7, lines 20-21). Another way we framed our conversations that led us to discussing our curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices was in our second to last meeting. For example, I started with the suggestion, “identify anything that would fall into that category within our

practice, our program, and potentially within our institution” (MT11, lines 29-30). Using one of the resources I shared with the group (Sensoy, 2017), I further clarified, “if we problematize something, in other words, name it as a solvable problem, then we also need, we would want to then somehow take responsibility for working that problem” (MT11, lines 31-33). Another suggestion I made was, “It might be better to start with the things that are within our reach” (MT11, lines 34-35). Later in the meeting, a participant offered their own framing, “if we are minimalizing or marginalizing, what are we doing and how do we improve?” (MT11, lines 305-306). This topic of how we frame our work will be further discussed in chapter six.

### **Action items**

The group created a list of action items as a result of the discussions around our choices. These will be further discussed in chapter six, but here is a sampling of what the group brainstormed. One participant suggested, “I would love for us to better define what making thinking visible looks like within academia” (MT7, lines 156-157). Another participant said, “We could do a degree audit for our major” (MT11, line 95). Another group member offered, “for us to have an understanding of even that very simple thing that we inserted within our mission statement, that we're creating socially responsible citizens” (MT11, lines 397-399). During the final meeting, a group member asked, “What about adding a course about equity and inclusion that involved meeting with a larger variety of students through co-construction and experiential practices?” (MN12). Other suggestions included, “It would be so great if we had time to share with one another what we are doing in our courses” (MT11, lines 285-286). Another participant speculated, “I wonder if we can give some attention to what we offer and when and why and really kind

of get into that and make it our own” (MT11, lines 96-97). Another group member suggested “developing some sort of a collaborative way of supporting each other's practice as a way to disseminate change” (MT11, lines 360-361). A more complete list of what was generated will be discussed in chapter six.

### **Potential obstacles**

There was very little mention of why we could not or should not make changes in our curricular and pedagogical choices. However, it is worth mentioning the two issues raised regarding time and priority. For example, one participant mentioned, “But to do it with students takes so much time” (MT11, line 210). They were referring to helping students develop a specific set of critical thinking skills. Another participant was wondering about prioritizing the teaching of those critical thinking skills. They said, “We can't stick everything at the beginning of the major” (MT11, line 243).

One additional obstacle I am identifying during the analysis phase is that our group still has not wrestled with the context in which it exists and we each function. We envisioned how we might rethink curricular and pedagogical choices within our department, but we never discussed our complicity with the institutional policies that might conflict with a change in departmental choices. It remains to be seen how this will be dealt with and how our students will be impacted in the meantime.

In summary, the critical conversations inquiry group led us to reconsider our assessment practices, helped us plan a process for future work, made space for conversations about use of resources, look at our content, consider student needs and goals, examine classroom practices, question how we think about our profession, consider previous projects in a new light, develop actions items, and be aware of potential

obstacles. None of this would have been possible without the groundwork of examining our racial identities, developing racial literacy and critical self-reflection. Additionally, the efficacy of our ability to enact any of the changes we discussed will depend on the extent to which we continue the groundwork and treat it as a priority.

### **Researcher's Observation**

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I have had a deep-seeded fear of unjust persecution since childhood that has stayed with me and drives my desire for justice. I'm encouraged by what I heard some of my fellow participants say that showed an emotional connection to this work. Even in writing this analysis, I wrestled with myself. Raised to be a rule-follower, I wanted to present my findings in a scholarly way and live up to what I thought were the expectations of the academy. But it was challenging to honor our hearts, and I wasn't brave enough to imagine breaking out of the box. I'm learning that confronting and dismantling whiteness requires the bravery to humanize my work.

## CHAPTER SIX – Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to confront and dismantle whiteness in an Educational Studies department's curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices using a critical conversation inquiry group. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do faculty within an Educational Studies department think about their racial identities and the relevance of racial identity to the program, the institution, and higher education?
2. How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop critical self-reflection?
3. How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversation inquiry group develop racial literacy?
4. How does participation in a critical conversation inquiry group affect curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices made by Educational Studies faculty?

In this chapter, I illustrate how my findings connect with existing literature and then elaborate on how this study makes new contributions to the field. Additionally, I will offer suggestions for further research into dismantling whiteness in higher education as well as possible applications of a critical conversation inquiry group. Lastly, I describe the limitations of this study.

### Confronting and Dismantling Whiteness

There is an increase in teacher education programs focused on social justice and literature that offer future K-12 educators guidance about how to choose curriculum that does not reinforce whiteness and better represents the lives of the children they are teaching. For example, Bree Picower's new book, *Reading, Writing and Racism*:

*Disrupting Whiteness in Teacher Education and in the Classroom* (2021) is all about the relationship between teachers' racial beliefs and the curriculum they choose. Picower also teaches in a College of Education where she educates her students about racist curriculum and how to look at institutional practices that perpetuate whiteness with the goal of dismantling those practices. But how do the faculty who teach in teacher education programs learn to disrupt whiteness? How do teacher educators learn how to have conversations about whiteness and racism? These questions were the impetus for this study. The purpose of this study was to examine how higher education faculty might develop the capacity to confront and dismantle whiteness in their own practices using a critical conversation inquiry group.

The findings of this study support the presumption that when higher education faculty in an Educational Studies department examined their racial identity and recognized its significance to the program it became an act of confronting whiteness and was necessary groundwork for being able to dismantle whiteness. The findings also support the idea that higher education faculty within an Educational Studies department developed racial literacy to the extent they were willing and able to examine their racial identity. Lastly, the findings of this study support the assertion that a critical conversation inquiry group can affect the curricular, pedagogical, and policy choices of an Educational Studies department if participants develop critical self-reflection. Although the participants made progress, the findings also show areas that require further attention. The growth and learning accomplished does not denote completion or arrival at a destination. The findings represent progress as well as room for continued growth.

### **Racial Identity**

Developing an awareness of one's racial identity is necessary and foundational to confronting and dismantling whiteness (Bryant et al, 2015; Picower, 2021; Rogers & Mosley, 2014). The findings from this study show that through discussions of power, privilege, and the other, participants developed an awareness of their racial identity. However, only when participants acknowledged their relationship to the system and moved away from proving they weren't racist, did their racial self-examination uncover meaningful insights. Some participants were able to recognize their racial socialization (Sanders, 1999; Schniedewind, 2005) and their racial connection to a racialized system (DiAngelo, 2018), and these participants were more efficacious at confronting whiteness and envisioning how to dismantle it within the program and institution. The findings also show that participants being able to notice and name feelings within the meetings was nascent at best.

### **Power, Privilege, and the Other**

Understanding how we think about and utilize power to disrupt unjust power structures is one of the goals of critical analysis (Rogers & Mosely, 2014). Only one participant seemed to be capable of noticing and confronting our unexamined assumptions of power. Because the group had trouble overall understanding our complicity with the system, we did not discuss how we could disrupt unjust power structures. We would need to make this an intentional meeting topic or incorporate it into the reflection protocol.

Likewise, the concept of privilege came up because of one participant who continually mentioned it as part of their background knowledge. Because we wrote and examined our racial autobiographies, it became very clear to us what advantages we had

growing up, and this exercise was vital to the study (Mosley Wetzel & Rogers, 2015).

Once again, the concept of privilege and subsequently the tendency to become complacent could have been embedded in the reflection protocol. Checking in with each participant regarding their awareness of privilege would have been a way to confront whiteness more obviously.

Beside examining our privilege, our discussion of our racial autobiographies revealed our tendency to discuss the “other.” This tendency to find it easier to discuss the “other” as racial (DiAngelo, 2018), is an example of how this group has room for growth. However, this pattern of assigning race to the “other” was discussed earlier in the study, and it might be informative if participants were given the opportunity to revise or rewrite their racial autobiographies at the end of a similar study.

### **Racial Socialization and Connection to a Racial System**

The findings show that our group had varying degrees of understanding about how we have been socialized racially. Some participants were very clear about how their upbringing taught them white superiority. Additionally, some participants recognized how they were socialized to be comfortable with and aspire to aspects of white supremacy culture (Akun, 2020). Whereas other participants were only comfortable with acknowledging how society was segregated, and that segregation might still have implications today.

Although this study was designed to look at a group of people, the findings related to racial identity differed among participants. Being able to recognize that racial socialization is connected to a racial system is part of racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013).



In this study, the participants who had a clearer understanding of their racial socialization were better able to discuss their racial connection to the system built on whiteness.

### **Discomfort and Racial Emotional Intelligence**

Discussing our discomfort and racial emotional intelligence gave the group a chance to examine their racial identity in a different way. One of the aspects of white supremacy culture is avoidance of emotions (Akun, 2020). Understanding that emotions are vital to understanding one's own racial identity was the premise for asking participants about their emotional awareness. Radd and Grosland (2019) explain, in their article about discursive practices that reinforce whiteness, that there is a culturally informed code of emotional conduct based on "which emotions are acceptable, to be felt by whom, and expressed in what way" (p. 662). The findings of this study show that participants were willing to discuss past encounters with discomfort, but there was no mention of discomfort as a result of this study. When participants were asked to examine other feelings, the responses varied by participant, but overall they showed distance. In other words, participants distanced themselves from their feelings by using neutral language, talking about the exercise itself, and sharing feelings from events that happened in the past. Our racial emotional intelligence was nascent. This result is very concerning. As Resmaa Menakem (2017) explains in her book, whiteness and racism have created racial trauma that needs to be addressed through the body and heart. Our group needed to explore our emotions on a regular basis instead of only once.

The findings from the first research question (How do faculty within an Educational Studies department think about their racial identities and the relevance of

racial identity to the program?) align with research in the field and support the need for examining one's racial identity in order to confront and dismantle whiteness.

### **Racial Literacy**

Racial literacy is the skill or ability to detect and discuss racism as well as the system of whiteness that perpetuates racism. The findings related to the third research question (How do Educational Studies faculty in a critical conversations inquiry group develop racial literacy?) show how we made progress and how the group could continue to improve its racial literacy. In other words, to what extent could participants recognize, confront, and begin to dismantle whiteness, and how did the group do this?

### **Recognizing Whiteness**

The findings of this study show that our group made progress in its ability to recognize whiteness which is a version of confronting whiteness. The fact that one of our participants was unwilling to use the term whiteness shows there is room for continued work in this area. Most of the group was able to identify how they uphold whiteness through avoidance. Ironically, when identifying other aspects of whiteness, the group avoided talking about their complicity and utilized examples of people outside the department. In other words, the group discussed how they had seen other people be willfully ignorant (Applebaum, 2019), defensive (Dyson, 2017), and focused on compliance (Okun, n.d). Recognizing our own ignorance and sense of power was difficult individually unless someone in the group pointed out the misconception. This is why conducting this study using a dialogical approach was effective. Helping each other recognize our ignorance or blind spots was crucial to making progress, but we were

cautious and gentle about pointing them out to one another, which is avoidance rather than confronting whiteness.

The texts we used were vital to helping participants recognize whiteness. The videos and writings we utilized gave us new perspectives to apply. In other words, we needed information about what whiteness looks like and how it functions so we could recognize how it functions in our lives. However, this did not necessarily translate right away into us recognizing how we uphold whiteness. That took time and did not happen for all group members. Because not all participants were able to recognize their complicity with the system, I would recommend future research include texts that address the difference between individual racism and systemic racism as well as an exercise to self-examine one's complicity with the system.

### **Confronting Whiteness**

The findings of this study show that our group made progress towards confronting whiteness through interaction, our use of entry points, use of new language, understanding our responsibility, and acknowledging our socially constructed racial identity.

Our capacity to confront whiteness was closely connected to our dialogical approach, specifically the ways we made space for one another, listened, and built on one each other's ideas. Because whiteness suggests a particular point of view, demands compliance, and discourages multiple perspectives, it was an act of defiance or confrontation to do the opposite. Although the group made progress in its ability to interact, the findings show that participants could benefit from ongoing practice, especially by noticing and naming racism (DiAngelo, 2018).

The group's reluctance to say something when a fellow participant was voicing a limited perspective relates closely to the way we needed certain entry points into each new topic. In other words, developing the capacity to confront whiteness hinged on whether the participant could bridge their current knowledge to the concept being introduced. To the extent that a participant could conceptually understand the terminology we were using, the participant was able to confront their own complicity with whiteness. The findings of this study show that merely utilizing new terminology or hearing others use it did not help one develop the capacity to confront whiteness. Participants needed to embrace the new terminology or concepts as a valid perspective (Meister, 2017).

Being able to understand our responsibility as white people is part of confronting whiteness. Participants dabbled in this understanding but tended to focus on wanting to liberate black people rather than take responsibility for confronting whiteness in their own practice. The group also voiced how overwhelming the system is and talked about whiteness as though it is a force of which they are at the mercy. The difficulty in confronting whiteness was personally connected to the extent each person was willing to talk about their racial socialization, specifically how we were taught to uphold whiteness. The findings of this study show that those who had difficulty confronting their complicity with whiteness needed more practice looking at how they were racially socialized, not looking at how they were racially socialized to view the other, but how they were racially socialized to look at themselves.

### **Dismantling Whiteness**

Although some had difficulty identifying and confronting whiteness in themselves, others were able to discuss and envision ways we could begin to dismantle whiteness in the program. Group members identified the need to resist the ideology of colonialism, challenge the dominant paradigm in education, make this initiative a priority, listen more and better, and engage with those who resist change. One concept that helped us practice dismantling whiteness throughout the study was non-binary thinking. The term was introduced in our first meeting by one participant and became a concept we applied to combat the “either/or” thinking that is one characteristic of whiteness (Okun, 2020).

In summary, the group made progress in developing its racial literacy to the extent we recognized or understood what whiteness looks like, confronted whiteness in ourselves, and altered our behavior by listening better, taking responsibility for our actions, and embracing new terminology and perspectives as valid. The findings from this study about developing racial literacy are supported by research in the field (Benson & Fiarman, 2019; Brookfield, 2017; Rogers & Wetzel, 2014; Schieble, 2020; Stevenson, 2017; Sue, 2016). However, none of these publications are focused on the need for faculty within higher education in the United States to develop such skills, and as this study shows, there is a need. A related study conducted by Fraser-Burgess, et al. (2020) came out after this study was conducted. Fraser-Burgess, et al. studied how higher education faculty who prepare professionals to work in the field of K-12 education can better understand and address racism in school discipline. Their findings show that the use of discourse to examine one’s sociocultural location through a critical lens helped the faculty better understand how the disparity between their understanding of K-12

education and the experience of black girls in K-12 education. The findings from this study align with their findings.

### **Critical Self-Reflection**

Participants were encouraged to practice taking a learner stance, and this turned out to be a crucial difference whether participants could successfully develop critical self-reflection. The idea of taking a learner stance came from Schieble, et al. (2020) and the findings of this study support the premise that in order to critically self-reflect, one must put aside the tendency to prove what is known and examine what is not known. The participant that had the least background knowledge but fully embraced a learner stance made some of the most insightful observations and defied the norm of being defensive.

Looking at how our assumptions operate in various contexts (Benson & Fiarman, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Meister, 2017) was another useful approach to developing critical self-reflection. The important shift we made was from considering our assumptions as only implicit to understanding that assumptions can be held explicitly. In other words, one participant was confused when asked to examine their assumptions because they couldn't figure out how they'd be able to get at their implicit biases, which are typically unconscious. This conversation helped us all realize that even our consciously held assumptions need to be examined critically.

Questioning whether our knowledge came from informed sources, engaging in dialogue, (Rogers & Mosley, 2014), and utilizing a recursive model (Shieble, et al., 2020) were intentionally embedded in the study to support our critical self-reflection. Because the department being studied has a strong connection to experiential education, the recursive model was reconceived by the group as an experiential model. An experiential

model suggests starting with a shared experience followed by reflection, envisioning application, and then trying it out. The findings show that the group not only called this an experiential process, but they enacted it as such. Experiential education theory could be utilized in future research to analyze this kind of critical study.

The group made progress in its ability to critically self-reflect when we employed metacognitive statements, considered impact (DiAngelo, 2018), and asked questions (Schieble, et al., 2020). I am not aware of any studies regarding the use of metacognitive statements to support critical self-reflection, but our findings show this was a useful tool. There were several instances when group members shared their thought process aloud which modeled critical self-reflection and made it visible to the group (Ritchhart, et al, 2011). Another important tool for progress was shifting perspective from intent to impact. Considering impact is a well-known concept among social justice advocates, and the findings of this study support the necessity and usefulness of this mental shift to include consideration of impact and not only intent. Those who made this shift were better able to ask critical questions from a learner's stance. The power of the combination of utilizing metacognitive statements and taking a learner stance was illustrated in the findings from the participant reflections. If the goal of a critical conversation is to be able to confront and dismantle whiteness, the findings show that metacognitive statements and taking a learner stance are necessary to achieving this goal.

Because of the progress the group made, we had insights about our potential for further critical self-reflection which not only confronts whiteness but begins to dismantle it. We were able to envision how we might take action as a result of our new insights (Kolb, 1984). We gained clarity about what our role could and should be going forward

(Meister, 2017). The group also identified its desire to keep the work going which is a refreshing difference compared to studies that have looked at the inefficacy of initiatives or training programs that are short-term (Applebaum, 2019, Benson & Fiarman, 2019, Tate & Page, 2018). Going forward, the group identified eight methods that could be used to support further work together:

- Be intentional about the way the conversation is framed (Pollock, 2008; Tatum, 2017)
- Ask how the dominant culture functions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Rodriguez, 2010)
- Be open to new perspectives (Brook et al., 2015; Sanders, 1999)
- Look at historical norms, traditions, and policies (Stark, 2014)
- Compare classroom practices to societal norms (Keating, 2000; McLaren, 2003)
- Cite examples of systems based on white supremacy (Edwards, 2017)
- Discuss how our personal ideals are based on societal norms (Rogers & Mosley, 2014; Shor, 2012)
- Consider the whole community rather than an individual perspective (DiAngelo, 2018)

Seven of the eight methods were concepts I had encountered in the literature review for this study. The first method listed, “Be intentional about the way the conversation is framed,” did not show up in my literature review, but as I reviewed the findings of this study I went back and did more research. The sources cited are a result of that further research. Identification of these eight methods is an example that the findings of this study align with current research in the field.



One additional example of how our group developed critical self-reflection comes from participants' answers to the fifth question on the participant reflection form (How do your own social positions inform your perspective?). The findings from the participant reflections show that including this question revealed lack of awareness, invited consideration of impact, and created space to rethink one's actions. These findings align with research in the field (Schieble, 2019) and reinforce the need to ask participants to consider their social position as part of a study on confronting and dismantling whiteness.

### **Curricular, Pedagogical, and Policy Choices**

School reform has been a topic of discussion for decades. Abolitionists like Bettina Love (2018) call for dismantling the system in order to rebuild education rather than reforms that make surface changes and keep the underlying racist system. The findings related to the fourth research question (How does participation in a critical conversation inquiry group affect curricular and pedagogical choices in an Educational Studies program?) show how we re-envisioned our program, as reformists or as abolitionists. In other words, how did our efforts to examine our racial identity and develop critical self-reflection and racial literacy affect our beliefs about re-envisioning the program we offer and lead us to make curricular, pedagogical, and policy changes?

### **Reformation or Abolition**

During our discussions focused on rethinking our choices, we approached the work using qualifications like dismantling whiteness, critically examining, and problematizing. This framework led us to ideas for reforms and potentially abolition.

The group discussed its desire to rethink the way we assess learning. If the future conversation is approached from an abolitionist perspective, we'd need to ask ourselves

questions like: What knowledge counts? Who decides what knowledge counts? What approaches to making meaning lead to liberation and new possibilities? In the study, we talked about rethinking what evidence students can use to show their learning and shifting the focus of assessment to how students are applying critical thinking rather than accruing knowled. If these ideas offered by participants are added to the program, they have the potential to reform and possibly improve assessment practices; however, what if the group was willing to ask more fundamental questions like: Do we need assessment? How does assessment impact students' lives and create opportunities?

Similar to the group's ideas about assessment, we discussed rethinking class titles, course descriptions, course outcomes, examining course materials, developing a new course, analyzing our department mission and goals, and doing a degree audit. Depending on how the group chooses to proceed, these curricular aspects of the program can be reformed or abolished and reconstructed. In the final meeting of this study, the group prioritized next steps. One of the top requests was that we utilize a process mentioned by one of the participants who deconstructs and reconstructs texts using a critical lens. The group agreed we would like to apply that tool to our curricular and pedagogical practice. To the extent we would be willing to link the work to the fundamental beliefs on which our curricular and pedagogical choices rest, we would be edging towards dismantling whiteness.

The group agreed that in order to be successful, we'd need to make time and space for sharing what we're are doing in each of our classes and how we approach our work philosophically. One of the first items the group slated for immediate action was an

open and transparent conversation about the budget and how we allocate resources because that's one way we communicate our beliefs about what matters most.

Lastly, the group envisioned how we might shift our thinking in more fundamental ways. We asked ourselves questions like: Does the Educational Studies degree meet students' needs? What do students need from an Educational Studies degree? Are we perpetuating beliefs about the teaching profession that need rethinking? What are the ramifications of how we talk about the teaching profession? This conversation about rethinking the teaching profession was the closest we came to connecting our program to a more societal perspective as a way to confront and dismantle whiteness in our curricular and pedagogical choices.

### **Implications**

This study has implications for how a critical conversation inquiry group could be employed to confront and dismantle whiteness in other higher education academic departmental practices. For example, additional research could be conducted into how faculty might confront and dismantle whiteness in their assessment practices, advising, program development, professional development, hiring practices, course scheduling, office hours, syllabi, etc.

One of the implications of this study is that because of the autonomy higher education faculty have and the aim of higher education there is an opportunity (paperson, 2017) that may not exist outside of academia. Providing this kind of departmental initiative makes the most sense in an environment already premised on critical thinking, or critically examining one's beliefs. It also makes sense that the people who are in the

business of teaching critical thinking should be the ones to engage in an initiative that helps them examine their own beliefs more deeply.

Future studies regarding the embodied nature of racism would be a good follow-up for the findings related to lack of racial emotional awareness or stamina. This study remained mostly within the cognitive realm, and future research should include the social-emotional and physical aspects, or lack thereof, of whiteness.

Future studies might also consider examining the data using experiential theory which would allow for analysis related to spirituality, a Native American perspective, gender, and ethics, to name a few. Future studies might also consider doing an individual participant analysis using an ethnographic approach since this study shows a notable difference in the way participants engaged in this initiative.

Lastly, the results of this study show that the group was able to identify next steps, but there was no time for implementation of those action items until after the study was completed. The implication of this is that future studies might consider a longer timeline to allow for implementing action items and assessing their efficacy. In fact, I would not recommend turning this type of study into a professional development initiative because of the way professional development in higher education is approached as an event rather than an initiative. Although maybe a study like this intentionally implemented as a new version of professional development could help the academy rethink professional development as on-going, collaborative, dialogical, and inquiry-based.

### **Limitations**

Although there are implications for this study being utilized in other academic departments, there are certain limitations that should be considered. The results of this study were influenced by the context, the participants, the researcher, and the content.

### **Context**

The environment in which this study took place could be a limiting factor for future studies. The study took place within a department that already had high levels of collegiality. It also took place at a time when our nation had just seen George Floyd murdered in broad daylight by a police officer. This study also took place within a department that had recently written a new mission statement that included social justice as one of its aims. None of these conditions is prerequisite for conducting a study like this, but these conditions did influence the findings of this study.

### **Participants**

The limitations of this study are partly due to the unique nature of participants. Firstly, the entire department voluntarily agreed to participate, but willingness did not necessarily translate into a learner stance. Secondly, each participant came with a unique mix of background knowledge, and in order for growth to occur, pointing out blind spots was crucial. Lastly, all participants were white, which allowed us to speak a little more freely, but there was still some white fragility. Any of these factors may limit the transferability of the findings, but if other researchers are aware of these limitations, adjustments could be made to address any differences.

### **Researcher**

Besides being a participant and researcher within the Educational Studies department, I serve as division head for the social sciences at our institution. This could

have created a power dynamic that influenced the results of this study. I was also mindful that because I had designed the study and facilitated our meetings that participants looked to me for confirmation or validation at times. However, I do think that it was a strength that I was a member of the department rather than an “outsider.” If I conducted this study with another department, the format would need to be altered, most notably, I would need to make sure I was not positioning myself as an expert. It is a constant temptation to shift into a proving stance, but as soon as I do that, I have betrayed the work.

In addition, I am aware that my background and knowledge influenced this study. Although I worked to uncover and confront my biases, I know I still have blind spots. For example, even in the time between developing this study and writing up the findings, my understanding of “confronting and dismantling” has evolved. I used to think of confronting whiteness as a static phenomenon, like it was enough to be able to notice and name it. I’ve come to understand that confronting whiteness means being proactive, speaking up, and resisting the pull of complacency and indifference, and I’m guessing that understanding will evolve to a new understanding. I used to think dismantling whiteness meant getting rid of certain practices and policies, but I then wondered what would take their place. Although this study only started to scratch the surface of what’s possible when a department begins to confront and dismantle whiteness, the grassroots ripple-effect has already begun. I know my learning will continue, but I also know I don’t have to wait to take action while I’m still learning, as long as I’m willing to accept feedback and learn from my mistakes.

One thing that worries me is the lack of accountability built into this kind of initiative because it is a grassroots model. The beauty of a grassroots effort is that they

are born of genuine desire to participate and are fueled by intrinsic motivators. However, I wonder if there's a way to build in the kind of accountability that ensures progress and efficacy. I can imagine Dr. Matthew Davis asking me how this study would lead to tangible and meaningful change. At the moment it hinges on the department members who see this work as vital and not just an exercise.

### **Content**

The texts chosen for this study worked well for this group to understand whiteness, and no adjustments were made once the study began. It might be worth considering additional resources that would provide examples of policy changes within other higher education institutions to help spark more conversations about confronting and dismantling whiteness within policy choices.

### **Final Thoughts**

Participating in this study has been transformational (Mezirow, 1997). Before this study, I had an intellectual understanding of the concepts I had read about in the literature regarding racial identity, racial literacy, and critical self-reflection as it relates to confronting and dismantling whiteness. But, until I participated in a shared experience with my colleagues, I didn't feel the impact. Just like watching someone scale a cliff keeps a person distant from the risk and reward, I had only been a spectator up to this point. It was through communicative learning (Habermas, 1981) that I had to face my values, beliefs, feelings, and purpose. This kind of disruption helped me build stamina, awareness, humility, and new knowledge, but more importantly it taught me how to be a better activist. I've approached my courses this semester with an unapologetic critical lens, not only making space for students to examine their racial identities and develop

critical literacy but making it a foundational piece to the coursework. I've spoken up in meetings when a decision was going to maintain the status quo. I've posed questions that disrupt the dominant narrative, and I've found there are more people within our community who are yearning to join the revolution.



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## APPENDIX A

Diversity – In our first meeting, one participant shared, “We have a significant amount of diversity, but we often lean on those people to ask them questions about the issues that are hot right now about racism” (MT1, lines 141-142). In this case, diversity meant people of color. In a later meeting, one participant made the observation, “We’ve slipped into the language of the other as non-white rather than recognizing the diversity” (MN6). In this case, diversity meant variety, but still in reference to people of color.

Equity – One participant explained the difference between equity and equality. Equity considers “what they need to be successful versus equality which is treating everyone the same” (MT5, line 96). In a later meeting, one participant was discussing our use of department funds and they said, “potentially we could think through how to more equitably encourage the use” (MT11, lines 68-69). Throughout the study, our discussions of equity were focused on meeting student needs. However, the discussion did not identify how those needs would be determined.

Inclusion – In a few cases we discussed what inclusion looks like. For example, one participant mentioned, “making sure that we're having multiple perspectives” (MT7, lines 311-312) as a way to be inclusive. Another participant was thinking about inclusion as a certain program “that is more approachable for some students” (MT7, line 115-116). Another participant described the way our meeting felt inclusive. “This is a space that allows for the silenced to speak up” (MN8). We were able to describe inclusive practices in general terms, and there was consensus that a more inclusive program was a worthy goal.

Intersectionality – Although we did not use the term intersectionality, the concept came up in our discussions, specifically referencing the intersectionality of race, gender, and nationality. For example, one participant reflected, “The teaching profession is very white and female” (MN12). Another participant suggested, “factor in not just a person of color or maybe an international student, but also a female” (MT7, lines 262-263). There was awareness that there are social factors that intersect with race.

Ethnocentric – We utilized the word ethnocentric to explain how the dominant narrative leads to a comparison between mainstream education and experiential education. One participant remarked, “I would argue it is certainly ethnocentric” (MT7, line 100) when noticing how a traditional classroom model gets centered within the field of education. Another participant explained how they see certain viewpoints being held up as more correct or acceptable. They said, “validity and accuracy are often words that are associated with ethnocentrism” (MT7, line 369). The group was able to ponder together the impact an ethnocentric approach has on educational practices.

Hegemony – Our conversations often came back to a recognition of the dominant narrative on which we were raised, Western culture. One participant explained, “so we’re thinking of that as the hegemonic norm that’s based off of male whiteness” (MT9, lines 243-244). The group recognized that our educational practices are an act of hegemony if we do not dismantle the underlying whiteness.

Colonialism – Our group also recognized the connection between whiteness and colonialism. One participant stated that the “cultural norm we live in is even derived from days of colonialism” (MT9, lines 242-243). Because we did not discuss this point more

fully, it is difficult to know whether all participants understood what was meant by colonialism.

Western – We also talked about the concept of a westernized viewpoint. For example, one participant explained, “So it's a Western construct to suggest that the classroom has Theory and Practice and there's this othering of outdoor and experiential ed” (MT7, lines 33-35). The participants who used the term Western saw a clear connection to whiteness, but not everyone in the group acknowledged the connection.

Indigenous ways – One participant was well-versed in indigenous knowledge and utilized the terminology during the study. Another participant picked up on this language and began using it as well. Upon reflection, the group noted, “We talked about indigenous ways of thinking and non-western ways of thinking” (MN8). The use of this terminology by two participants creates the possibility for future investigation and is part of the discussion in chapter 5.

Neoliberalism – Another term we used in our discussions was neo-liberalism.

Specifically, when one participant was answering a question that had been posed by another participant about where a certain mentality comes from. They stated, “I can tell you exactly what it is. It's neo-liberalism” (MT9, line 351). The speaker went on to explain what neo-liberalism is. Other participants never used the term, but this is another concept that could be further explored and is part of the discussion in chapter six.

Validity – The concept of validity was specifically introduced in one of the articles we read. This led to a discussion about how we approach validity. For example, one participant shared, “I would say that an individual story, if it's reflexive it is legitimate, and it has validity in that reflexive process” (MT7, lines 336-338). Although we had a

thorough discussion about validity and were in agreement, this is another concept that could be further explored and is part of the discussion in chapter six.

Capitalism – The concept of capitalism came up in the same conversation about neoliberalism. In reference to how salaries are set by the institution, one participant explained to another, “It’s defining the post education system through a capitalist lens” (MT9, line 352). Although the concept of capitalism was briefly mentioned, this is another concept that could be further explored and is part of the discussion in chapter six.

Interpretivist – One participant introduced this term during our analysis of one of the readings. They explained, “The authors have an interpretivist point of view. So, the goal is understanding” (MT7, lines 335-336). The group did not discuss or explore this concept further, but knowing the goals of our department it has direct implications on our program. It is part of the discussion in chapter six.

Reconciliation – Our conversation about our racial narratives led to a comment by one participant who shared, “We talk a lot about colonialism in Canada and have worked on reconciliation” (MT5, lines 304-305). The focus at the time was to analyze our racial identity, and this term was discussed within that context. The group did not consider the concept of reconciliation within the larger context of the study of our program, but it deserves further consideration and is discussed in chapter six.

Racist – The term racist was mostly discussed in our first meeting. For example, one participant shared how their understanding of the term racist has evolved to a point that they now identify as racist. “I never identified as racist until I started looking at the broader definitions of what it means to be racist” (MT1, lines 164-165). Another participant noted how an organization can be racist. “I discovered a couple of systemic



roadblocks which would make me assert that [our institution] is racist” (MT1, lines 197-198). One participant who initially misunderstood the definition of racist being discussed stated, “I feel like people can be racist without intent to harm” (MT1, line 131).

Developing a shared understanding of what it means to be racist was a good first step.

Ideas about how this understanding could have been furthered is discussed in chapter six.

Racism – As a group, our discussion of racism spanned throughout the study. In our first meeting one participant shared their opinion about how racism has changed. “You talk about the unconscious bias, and you talk about hegemonic structure, all those sorts of things. That is much more like a modernized view of racism” (MT1, lines 180-181).

During a group reflection, a participant observed, “We also might have different views about racism” (MN4). As we shifted our focus to discussing whiteness, the group stopped using the term racism. Further discussion of this change is in chapter six.

Non-binary - While developing our racial literacy, the group began to use the term binary as a substitute for “either or thinking” which was highlighted in the document *White Supremacy Culture* (Okun, n.d.). This concept became a way of identifying, analyzing, and evaluating our practices and those of the institution. For example, one participant used non-binary language when they added, “and everything in between” (MT9, line 188). Another participant emphasized a main point spoken of in one of the videos we watched. “I was fascinated by her conversation of binaries and how racism is good/bad, guilt/not guilty, shame/not shame” (MT1, lines 193-194). Subsequently, that same participant illustrated how non-binary thinking could be applied to a personal example when thinking through their privilege. “So was I guilty? I don’t think so. Was I innocent there? I don’t think so. It’s not a binary” (MT1, lines 206-207). In another meeting, a

different participant observed how different people think about meeting deadlines. “I feel like it’s a spectrum. It’s not like just an either/ or kind of thing” (MT9, lines 185-186). During a reflection session one of us shared, “Our original examples were not quite as binary, but our dialogue slipped into a binary” (MN6). The group became more aware of its tendency to think in binaries and utilized this concept throughout the study. This aspect of racial literacy was the one that the group seemed most drawn to and is discussed further in chapter six.